THE GATHERING OF BROTHER HILARIUS

MICHAEL FAIRLESS

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THE GATHERING OF BROTHER HILARIUS

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME:

THE ROADMENDER

By MICHAEL FAIRLESS

Illustrated by E. W. Waite

THE STORY OF MY HEART

By RICHARD JEFFERIES

Illustrated by E. W. Waite

'This was the gathering of Brother Hilarius.'

(Page 141)

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(*Page* 141)

THE GATHERING OF BROTHER HILARIUS

BY

MICHAEL FAIRLESS

AUTHOR OF "THE ROADMENDER"
"THE GREY BRETHREN"

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"To those dearworthy ones
to whom I owe all;
I give that which is theirs already."

Through this little book runs the road of life, the common road of men, the white highway that Hilarius watched from the monastery gate and Brother Ambrose saw nearing its end in the Jerusalem of his heart.

The book is a romance. It may be read as a romance of the Black Death and a monk with an artist's eyes; but for the author it is a romance of the image of God. While the Divine Face is being unveiled for Hilarius in the masque that shocks and bewilders him, and the secret of sorrow and sin, of death and life and love, is told by his speechless and dying "little maid," we, if we choose, may hear again the Roadmender's epilogue to the story of the man of this earth, the man of the common highway:—"'Dust and ashes and a house of devils,' he cries; and there comes back for answer, '*Rex concupiscet decorem tuum.*'"

M. E. D.

CONTENTS

PART I

THE SEED

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	Blind Eyes in the Forest	3
II.	The Love of Prior Stephen	13
III.	The King's Song-Bird	19

PART II

THE FLOWER

I.	The City of Pure Gold	33
II.	The City that Hilarius saw	41
III.	A Sending from the Lord	47
IV.	Blind Eyes which could see	55
V.	The White Way and Where it led	61
VI.	A Dark Finding	70
VII.	The Coming of Hunger and Love	82

CONTENTS

PART III

THE FRUIT

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	How long, O Lord, how long!	97
II.	Mary's Lilies	103
III.	Open Eyes at the Gate	110
IV.	The Passing of Prior Stephen	117
V.	"Gabriel, make this Man to understand the Vision"—Dan. viii. 16	122
VI.	The Hunger of Dickon the Woodman	128
VII.	The Vision of the Evening and the Morning	133
VIII.	"Behold the Fields are white"	138

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

This was the gathering of Brother Hilarius . . . . . *Frontispiece*

Since when did man paint the Blessed Mother with grey eyes and black hair —curly too, i' faith? 14

Hilarius found his Mistress, her hands idle on her knee 36

One comes who will open more cage doors than thine and mine, lad . . . 48

At a village hostel they found rough but friendly entertainment . . . 64

Kneeling, he took both her little brown hands, and his tears fell fast as he kissed them 92

Her voice was suddenly sweet . . . 108

The poor also crowded to the monastery gate and were fed, ay, even if the Brethren went hungry 120

PART I

THE SEED

CHAPTER I

BLIND EYES IN THE FOREST

Hilarius stood at the Monastery gate, looking away down the smooth well-kept road to the highway beyond. It lay quiet and serene in the June sunshine, the white way to the outer world, and not even a dust cloud on the horizon promised the approach of the train of sumpter mules laden with meats for the bellies and cloth for the backs of the good Brethren within. The Cellarer lacked wine, the drug stores in the farmery were running low; last, but not least, the Precentor had bespoken precious colours, rich gold, costly vellum, and on these the thoughts of Hilarius tarried with anxious expectation.

On his left lay the forest, home of his longing imaginings. The Monastery wall crept up one side of it, and over the top the great trees peered and beckoned with their tossing, feathery branches. Twice had Hilarius walked there, attending the Prior as he paced slowly and silently along the mossy ways, under the strong, springing pines; and the occasions were stored in his

memory with the glories of St Benedict's Day and Our Lady's Festivals. Away to the right, within the great enclosure, stretched the Monastery lands, fair to the eye, with orchard and fruitful field, teeming with glad, unhurried labour.

At a little elevation, overlooking the whole domain, rose the Priory buildings, topped by the Church, crown and heart of the place, signing the sign of the Cross over the daily life and work of the Brethren, itself the centre of that life, the object of that work, ever unfinished because love knows not how to make an end. To the monks it was a page in the history of the life of the Order, written in stone, blazoned with beauty of the world's treasure; a page on which each generation might spell out a word, perchance add a line, to the greater glory of God and St Benedict. They were always at work on it, stretching out eager hands for the rare stuffs and precious stones devout men brought from overseas, finding a place for the best of every ordered craft; their shame an uncouth line or graceless arch, their glory each completed pinnacle and fretted spire; ever restoring, enlarging, repairing, spendthrift of money and time in the service of the House of the Lord.

The sun shone hot on grey wall and green garth; the spirit of insistent peace brooded over the place. The

wheeling white pigeons circling the cloister walls cried peace; the sculptured saints in their niches over the west door gave the blessing of peace; an old, blind monk crossed the garth with the hesitating gait of habit lately acquired—on his face was great peace. It rested everywhere, this peace of prayerful service, where the clang of the blacksmith's hammer smote the sound of the Office bell.

Hilarius, at the gate, questioned the road again and again for sign of the belated train. It was vexatious; the Prior's lips would take a thinner line, for the mules were already some days overdue; and it was ill to keep the Prior waiting. The soft June wind swept the fragrance of Mary's lilies across to the lad; he turned his dreamy blue eyes from the highway to the forest. The scent of the pinewoods rushed to meet his sudden thought. Should he, dare he, break cloister, and taste the wondrous delight of an unwalled world? It were a sin, a grave sin, in a newly-made novice, cloister-bred. The sweet, pungent smell overpowered him; the trees beckoned with their long arms and slender fingers; the voice of the forest called, and Hilarius, answering, walked swiftly away, with bowed head and beating heart, between the sunburnt pine-boles.

At last he ventured to stop and look around him, his fair hair aflame in the sunlight, his eyes full of awe

of this arched and pillared city of mystery and wonder.

It was very silent. Here and there a coney peeped out and fled, and a woodpecker toiled with sharp, effective stroke. Hilarius' eyes shone as he lifted his head and caught sight of the sunlit blue between the great green-fringed branches: it was as if Our Lady trailed her gracious robe across the tree-tops. Then, as he bathed his thirsty soul in the great sea of light and shade, cool depths and shifting colours, the sense of his wrong-doing slipped from him, and joy replaced it—joy so great that his heart ached with it. He went on his way, singing *Lauda Syon*, his eyes following the pine-boles, and presently, coming out into an open glade, halted in amazement.

A flower incarnate stood before him; stood—nay, danced in the wind. Over the sunny sward two little scarlet-clad feet chased each other in rhythmic maze; dainty little brown hands spread the folds of the deep blue skirt; a bodice, silver-laced, served as stalk, on which balanced, lightly swaying, the flower of flowers itself. Hilarius' eyes travelled upwards and rested there. Cheeks like a sunburnt peach, lips a scarlet bow; shimmering, tender, laughing grey eyes curtained by long curling lashes; soft tendrils of curly hair, blue black in the shadows, hiding the low level brow. A

sight for gods, but not for monks; above all, not for untutored novices such as Hilarius.

His sin had found him out; it was the Devil, the lovely lady of St Benedict; he drew breath and crossed himself hastily with a murmured *Apage Satanas!*

The dancer stopped, conscious perhaps of a chill in the wind.

"O what a pretty boy!" she cried gaily. "Playing truant, I dare wager. Come and dance!"

Hilarius crimsoned with shame and horror.

"Woman," he said, and his voice trembled somewhat, "art thou not shamed to deck thyself in this devil's guise?"

The dancer bit her lip and stamped her little red shoe angrily.

"No more devil's guise than thine own," she retorted, eyeing his semi-monastic garb with scant favour. "Can a poor maid not practise her steps in the heart of a forest, but a cloister-bred youngster must cry devil's guise?"

As she spoke her anger vanished like a summer cloud, and she broke into peal on peal of joyous laughter. "Poor lad, with thy talk of devils; hast thou never looked a maid in the eyes before?"

Shrewdly hit, mistress; never before has Hilarius looked a maid in the eyes, and now he drops his own.

"Dost thou not know it is sin to deck the body thus, and entice men's souls to their undoing?"

"And what is the matter with my poor body, may it please you, kind sir?" she asked demurely, and stood with downcast eyes, like a scolded child.

"It is wrong to deck the body," began Hilarius, softening at her attitude, "because, because——"

Again the merry laugh rang out.

"Because, because—nay, Father" (with a mock reverence), "methinks thy sermon is not ready; let it simmer awhile, and *I* will catechise. How old art thou?" She held up her small finger admonishingly.

"Seventeen," replied Hilarius, surprised into reply.

"Art thou a monk?"

"Nay, a novice only."

"Hast thou ever loved?"

Hilarius threw up his hands in shocked indignation, but she went on unconcerned—

"'Twas a foolish question; the answer's writ large for any maid to read. But tell me, why art thou angry at the thought of love?"

Hilarius felt the ground slipping from under his feet.

"There is an evil love, and a holy love; it is good to love God and the Saints and the Brethren——"

"But not the sisters?" the wicked little laugh pealed out. "Poor sisters! Why, boy, the world is full

of love, and not all for the Saints and the Brethren, and it is good—good—good!" She opened her arms wide. "'Tis the devil and the monks who call it evil. Hast thou never seen the birds mate in the springtime, nor heard the nightingale sing?"

"It is well for a husband to love his wife and a mother her child. That is love in measure, but not so high as the love we bear to God and the Saints!" quoth Hilarius sententiously, mindful of yesterday's homily in the Frater.

"But how can'st thou know that thou lovest the Saints?" the dancer persisted.

How did he know?

"How dost thou know that thou lovest thy mother?" he cried triumphantly, forgetting the reprobate nature of the catechist, and anxious only to come well out of the wordy war.

But the unexpected happened.

"Dost thou dare speak to me of my mother? *I*, love her?—I *hate* her;" and she flung herself down on the grass in a passion of weeping.

Even a master of theology is helpless before a woman's tears.

"Maid, maid," said Hilarius, in deep distress, "indeed I did not mean to vex thee;" and he came up and laid his hand on her shoulder.

So successfully can the Prince of Darkness simulate grief!

The dancer sat up and brushed away her tears; she looked fairer and more flower-like than before, sitting on the green sward looking up at him through shining lashes.

"There, boy, 'tis naught. How could'st thou know? But what of thine own mother?"

"I know not."

"Nay, what is this? And thy father?"

"He was a gentle knight who died in battle ere I knew him. I came a little child to the Monastery, and know no other place."

"Ah,"—vindictively,—"then *thy* mother may have been a light o' love."

"Light of love; it has a wondrous fair sound," said Hilarius with a smile.

The maid looked at him speechless.

"*Go home, Boy,*" she said at last emphatically.

Just then a lad, a tumbler by his dress, pushed a way through the undergrowth, and stood grinning at the pair.

"So, Gia!" he said. "We must make haste; the others wait."

"'Tis my brother," said the dancer, "and"—pointing to the bag slung across the youth's shoulder—

"I trust he hath a fine fat hen from thy Monastery for our meal."

Hilarius broke into a cold sweat.

The Convent's hens! The Saints preserve us! Was nothing sacred, and were the Ten Commandments written solely for use in the Monasteries?

"'Tis stealing," he said feebly.

"'Tis stealing," the dancer mocked. "Hast thou another sermon ready, Sir Preacher?"

"Empty bellies make light fingers," quoth the youth. "Did'st thou ever hunger, master?"

"There is the fast of Lent which presses somewhat," said Hilarius.

"But ever a meal certain once in the day?" queried the girl.

"Aye, surely, and collation also; and Sunday is no fast."

The mischievous apes laughed—how they laughed!

"So, good Preacher," said the dancer at last, rising to her feet, "thou dost know it is wrong to steal; but hast never felt hunger. Thou dost know it is wrong to love any but God, the Saints, and thy mother; but thou hast never known a mother, nor felt what it was to love. Blind eyes! Blind eyes! the very forest could teach thee these things an thou would'st learn. Farewell, good novice, back to thy Saints and thy nursery; for

me the wide, wide world; hunger and love—love—love!"

She seized her brother's hand, and together they danced away like two bright butterflies among the trees.

Hilarius stared after them until they disappeared, and then with dazed eyes and drooping head took his way back to the Monastery. The train of mules had just arrived; all was stir, bustle, and explanation; and in the thick of it he slipped in unseen, unquestioned; but he was hardly conscious of this mercy vouchsafed him, for in his heart reigned desolation and doubt, and in his ears rang the dancer's parting cry, "Hunger and love—love—love!"

CHAPTER II

THE LOVE OF PRIOR STEPHEN

Brother Bernard, the Precentor, dealt out gold, paint and vellum with generous hand to his favourite pupil, and wondered at his downcast look.

"Methinks this gold is dull, Brother," Hilarius said one day, fretfully, to his old master.

And again—

"'Tis very poor vermilion."

The Brother looked at him enquiringly.

"Nay, nay, boy; 'tis thine eyes at fault; naught ails the colours."

Later, the Precentor came to look at the delicate border Hilarius was setting to the page of the Nativity of Our Lady.

"Now may God be good to us!" he cried with uplifted hands. "Since when did man paint the Blessed Mother with grey eyes and black hair—curly too, i' faith?"

Hilarius crimsoned, he was weary of limning ever with blue and gold, he faltered.

It was the same in chapel. The insistent question pursued him through chant and psalm. Did he really *love* the Saints—St Benedict, St Scholastica, St Bernard, St Hilary? The names left him untouched; but his lips quivered as he thought of the great love between the holy brother and sister of his Order. If he had had a sister would they have loved like that?

The Saints' Days came and went, and he scourged himself with the repeated question, kneeling with burning cheeks, and eyes from which tears were not absent, in the Chapel of the Great Mother. "Light of Love," the girl had called his mother; what more beautiful name could he find for the Queen of Saints herself? So he prayed in his simplicity:—"Great Light of Love, Mother of my mother, grant love, love, love, to thy poor sinful son!"

The question came in his daily life.

Did he love the Prior? He feared him; and his voice was for Hilarius as the voice of God Himself. Brother John? He feared him too; Brother John's tongue was a thing to fear. Brother Richard, old, half-blind? Surely he loved Brother Richard?—sad, helpless, and lonely, by reason of his infirmities—or was it only pity he felt for him?

Nay, let be; he loved them all. The Monastery was his home, the Prior his father, the monks his brethren;

' Since when did man paint the Blessed Mother
with grey eyes and black hair
—curly too, i' faith ?'

(*Page* 13)

'Since when did man paint the Blessed Mother
with grey eyes and black hair
—surely too, i' faith?'

(Page 13)

why heed the wild words of the witch in the forest? And yet what was it she had said? "For me the wide world, hunger, and love—love—love!"

He wandered in the Monastery garden and was troubled by its beauties. Two sulphur butterflies sported around the tall white lilies at the farmery door. Did they love?

He watched the sparrows at their second nesting, full of business and cheerful bickerings. Did they love?

She had said the answer was writ large for him to see: he wandered staring, wide-eyed but sightless.

At last, in his sore distress, he turned to the Prior, as the shipwrecked mariner turns to the sea-girt rock that towers serene and unhurt above the devouring waves.

The Prior heard him patiently, with here and there a shrewd question. When the halting tale was told he mused awhile, his stern blue eyes grew tender, and a little smile troubled the firm line of his mouth.

"My son," he said at length, "thou art in the wrong school; nursery, was it the maid said? A shrewd lass and welcome to the hen. Thou art a limner at heart—Brother Bernard tells of thy wondrous skill with the brush—and to be limner thou must learn to hunger and to love as the maid said. Ay, boy, and to be monk too, though alack, men gainsay it."

"Father," said Hilarius, waxing bold from excessive need, "did'st thou ever love as the maid meant?"

"Ay, boy—thy mother."

There was a long silence. Then the boy said timidly:—

"The maid said she might be light of love; 'tis a beautiful thought."

The Prior started, and looked at him curiously:—

"What did'st thou tell the maid?"

"That I never knew her, but that my father was a gentle knight who died ere I saw him; and then the maid said perchance my mother was light of love."

"Boy," said the Prior gravely, "'tis a weary tale, and sad of telling. Thy mother was wondrous fair without, but she reckoned love lightly, nay, knew it not for the holy thing it is, but thought only of bodily lusts. Pray for her soul"—his voice grew stern—"as for one of those upon whom God, in His great pity, may have mercy. Thus have I prayed these many years."

Hilarius looked at him in wide-eyed horror:—

"She was evil, wicked, my mother?"

"Ay—a light woman, that was what the maid meant."

Then great darkness fell upon the soul of Hilarius, and he clasped the Prior's knees, weeping and praying like a little child.

"And so, my son," said the Prior, "for a time thou shalt go out into the world, to strive and fail, hunger and love; only have a care that thou art chaste in heart and life; for it is the pure shall see God, and seeing love Him. Leave me now that I may set in order thy going; and send the Chamberlain hither to me."

That night Hilarius knelt through the long hours at the great Rood, and then at St Mary Maudlin's altar he did penance for his dead mother's sin.

A week later he left the Monastery as a bird leaves its nest, nay, is pushed out by the far-seeing parent bird, full of vague terrors of the great world without. He had a purse for his immediate needs; a letter to a great knight, Sir John Maltravers, who would be his patron; and another to the Prior's good friend, the Abbat of St Alban's. The Convent bade him a sad farewell, for they loved this gentle lad who had been with them from a little child; and Brother Richard strained his filmy eyes to look his last at the young face he would never see again.

The Prior gave him the Communion; and later walked beside him to the gates. Then as Hilarius knelt he blessed him; and the boy, overmastered by nameless fear, sprang up and prayed that he might stay and learn some other way, however hard. The Prior shook his head.

"Nay, my son, so it must be; else how shall I answer to the Master for this most precious lamb of my flock? Come back to us—an thou can'st—let no fear deter thee; only take heed, when thine eyes are opened and the great gifts of hunger and love are vouchsafed thee, to keep still the faithful heart of a little child."

Then he bade him go; and Hilarius, for the pull of his heart-strings, must needs run hot-foot down the broad forest road and along the highway, without daring to look back, and so out into the wide, wide world.

CHAPTER III

THE KING'S SONG-BIRD

MARTIN THE MINSTREL sat under a wayside oak singing softly to himself as he tuned his vielle. He was a long, lanky fellow, with straight black locks flat against his sallow face, and dark eyes that smouldered in hollow cavities. He wore the King's colours, and broke a manchet of white bread with his midday repast.

"Heigh-ho!" sighed Martin, and laid the vielle lovingly beside him, "another four leagues to Westminster, and I weary enough of shoe-leather already, and not another penny piece in my pocket 'til I win back to good King Ned. A brave holiday I have had, from Candlemas to Midsummer; free to sing or to be silent, to smile or frown; wide England instead of palace walls; a crust of bread and a jug of cider instead of a king's banquet. Now but another few leagues and the cage again. Money in my pocket, true, but a song here and a song there, such as suit the fancy of the Court gentles, not of Martin the Minstrel. Heigh-ho, heigh-ho! 'tis a poor bird sings at the word of a king,

and a poor enough song too, if Edward did but know it.

"Who comes here? Faith, the lad goes a steady pace and carries a light heart from his song; and no ill voice either."

It was Hilarius, and he sang the *Alma Redemptoris* as he sped along the green grass which bordered the highway.

When Martin hailed him, he turned aside gladly and his face lit up at the sight of the vielle.

"Whence dost thou come, lad?" said Martin, eyeing him with interest.

"Many days' journey from the Monastery of Prior Stephen," answered Hilarius.

"But thou art no monk?"

"Nay, a novice scarcely; but the Prior hath bidden me go forth to see the world. It is wondrous fair," he added sincerely.

"He who speaks thus is cloister-bred," said Martin, and, as Hilarius made sign of assent, "'tis writ on thy face as well. Thy Prior gave thee letters to the Abbat of St Peter's, I doubt not; thy face is set for Westminster."

"Ay, for Westminster, but my letters are for that good knight, Sir John Maltravers. I should have made an end of my journeying ere now but that two

days ago I met strange company. They took my purse and hat and shoes, and kept me with them all night until the late dawn. Then they gave me my goods again, and bade me God-speed."

"But kept thy purse?" Martin laughed.

"Nay, it is here, and naught is missing. It was all passing strange, and I feared them, for they looked evil men; yet they did me no wrong, and set me on my way gently enough, giving me provision, which I lacked."

"Pick-purses and cut-throats afraid of God's judgments for once," muttered Martin; then aloud, "Well, young sir, we shall do well if we win Westminster before nightfall; shall we journey together since our way is the same?"

Hilarius assented gladly; and as they went Martin told him of Court and King, and the wondrous doings when the Princess Isabel was wed. He listened open-eyed to tales of joust and revel and sport; and heard eagerly all the minstrel could tell of Sir John Maltravers himself, a man of great and good reputation, and no mean musician; "and," added Martin, "three fair daughters he hath, the eldest Eleanor, fairest of them all, of whom men say she would fain be a nun. Thou art a pretty lad, I wager one or other will claim thee for page."

"I will strive to serve well," said Hilarius soberly,

" but I have never spoken but to one maid 'til yesterday, when a woman gave me good-morrow."

Martin looked at his companion queerly.

" And thou art for Westminster! Nay, but by all the Saints this Prior of thine is a strange master! "

" It is but for a time," said Hilarius, " then I shall go back to the Monastery again. But first I would learn to be a real limner; I have some small skill with the brush," he added simply.

Martin stared.

" Back to the cloister? Nay, lad, best turn about and get back now, not wait till thou hast had a taste of Court life. Joust and banquet and revel, revel, banquet, and joust, much merry-making and little reason, much love and few marryings: a gay round, but not such as makes a monk."

Hilarius smiled.

" Nay, that life will not be for me. I am to serve my lord, write for him, methinks. But tell me, good Martin, dost thou love the Court? It seems a fine thing to be the King's Minstrel."

" Nay, lad, nay," said the other hastily, " give me the open country and the greenwood, and leave to sing or be silent. Still, the King is a good master, and lets me roam as I list if I will but come back; 'tis ill-faring in winter, so back I go to pipe in my cage and follow

the Court until next Lady-day lets the sun in on us again."

He struck his vielle lightly, and the two fell into a slower pace as the minstrel sang. Hilarius' eyes filled with tears, for he was still heart-sore, and Martin's voice rose and fell like the wind in the tossing tree-tops which had beckoned him over the Monastery wall. The song itself was sad—of a lover torn from his mistress and borne away captive to alien service. When it was ended they took a brisker pace in silence; then, after a while, Hilarius said timidly:—

"Did'st thou sing of thyself, good Martin?"

"Ay, lad, and of my mistress." He stopped suddenly, louted low to the sky, and with comprehensive gesture took in the countryside. "A fair mistress, lad, and a faithful one, though of many moods. A man suns himself in the warmth of her caresses by day, and at night she is cold, chaste, unattainable; at one time she is all smiles and tears, then with boisterous gesture she bids one seek shelter from her buffets. She gives all and yet nothing; she trails the very traces of her hair across a man's face only to elude him. She holds him fast, for she is mother of all his children; yet he must seek as though he knew her not, or she flouts him."

Hilarius listened eagerly. Was this what the dancer had meant—the "wide, wide world, hunger and love"?

"Did'st thou ever hunger, good Martin?"

"Ay, lad," said the minstrel, surprised, "and 'tis good sauce for the next meal."

"Did'st thou ever love?"

Martin broke into a great laugh.

"Ay, marry I have, more times than I count years. But see, here comes one who knows little enough of hunger or love."

Round the bend of the road came a man in hermit's dress carrying a staff and a well-filled wallet. His carriage seemed suddenly to become less upright, and he leaned heavily on his stick as he besought an alms from the two travellers.

Hilarius felt for his purse, but Martin stayed him.

"Nay lad, better have left thy money with the pick-purses than help to fill the skin of this lazy rogue; 'tis not the first time we have met. See here," and with a dexterous jerk he caught the hermit's wallet.

This one was too quick for him; with uplifted staff and a mouthful of oaths, sorely at variance with his habit, he snatched it back, flung the bag across his shoulder, and made off at a round pace down the road, while Martin roared after him to wait an alms laid on with a cudgel.

Hilarius gazed horrified from the retreating figure

to his laughing companion, who answered the unspoken question.

" A rascal, lad, yon carrion, and no holy father. They are the pest of every countryside, these lazy rogues who never do a hand's turn and yet live better than many a squire. I warrant he has good stuff in that larder of his to make merry with."

Hilarius walked on for some time in silence with bent head.

" I fear the world is an ill place and far from godliness," he said at last.

" It will look thus to one cloister-bred, and 'tis true enough that godliness is far from most men ; but if a hermit's robe may cover a rascal, often enough a good heart lies under an ill-favoured face and tongue. See, lad," as another turn in the road brought them in sight of Westminster, " there lies thy new world, God keep thee in it ! "

He pointed to a grey-walled city rising from the water's edge, with roof and pinnacle, gable and turret, aflame in the light of the western sky ; in front flowed the river like a stream of molten gold.

Hilarius gave a little cry.

" 'Tis like the New Jerusalem ! " he said, and Martin smiled grimly.

An hour later they stood within the walls of West-

minster city, and Hilarius, amazed and weary, clung close to Martin's side. Around him he saw russet-clad archers, grooms, men on horseback, pedlars, pages, falconers, scullions with meats, gallant knights, gaily dressed ladies ; it was like a tangled dream. The gabled fronts of the houses were richly blazoned or hung with scarlet cloth ; it was a shifting scene of colour, life, and movement, and, to Hilarius' untutored eyes, wild confusion. Outside the taverns clustered all sorts and conditions of men, drinking, gossiping, singing, for the day's work was done. In the courtyard of the " Black Boar " a chained bear padded restlessly to and fro, and Hilarius crossed himself anxiously—was the devil about to beset him under all guises at once ? He raised a fervent *Ora pro me* to St Benedict as he hurried past. A string of pack-horses in the narrow street sent folk flying for refuge to the low dark doorways, and a buxom wench, seeing the pretty lad, bussed him soundly. This was too much, only the man in him stayed the indignant tears. " Martin, Martin ! " he cried ; but the minstrel was on his own ground now, and was hailed everywhere with acclamations, and news given and demanded in a breath. Hilarius, shrinking, aghast, his ears scourged with rough oaths and rude jests, his eyes offended by the easy manners round him, his cheek hot from the late salute, took refuge under a low archway and waited

with anxious heart until the minstrel should have done with the crowd.

Martin did not forget him.

"Holà, lad!" he cried, "see how they welcome the King's bird back to his cage! As for thee, thou hast gone straight to thy cot like a homing pigeon; through that archway, lad, lies thy journey's end." Then, apprehending for the first time Hilarius' white face and piteous eyes, Martin strode across, swept him under the archway into a quiet courtyard where a fountain rippled, and, having handed him over to Sir John's steward, left him with a friendly slap on the back and the promise of speedy meeting.

Hilarius delivered the Prior's letter, and followed the steward into a rush-strewn hall where scullions and serving-men were busy with preparations for the evening meal; and sat there, lonely and dejected, his curiosity quenched, his heart sore, his whole being crying out for the busied peace and silent orderliness of his cloister home. The servants gibed at him, but he was too weary to heed; indeed he hardly noticed when the household swept into supper, until a page-boy tweaked him slyly by the ear and bade him come to table. He ate and drank thankfully, too dazed to take note of the meal; and the pages and squires among whom he sat left him alone, abashed at his gentleness. At last,

something restored by the much-needed food, Hilarius looked round the hall.

It reminded him of the Refectory at home, save that it was far loftier and heavily timbered. The twilight stealing in through high lancet windows served but to emphasize the upper gloom, which the morrow's sun would dissipate into cunningly carved woodwork—a man's thought in every quaintly wrought boss and panel, grotesque beast and guarding saint. A raised table stood at the upper end of the hall, and here gaily dressed pages waited on the master of the house and his honoured guests. Hilarius rightly guessed the tall careworn man of distinguished presence to be no other than Sir John himself, and he liked him well; but his eyes wandered carelessly over the rest of the company until they were caught and held by a woman's face. It was Eleanor, the fairest of the knight's three fair daughters; and when Hilarius saw her he felt as a weary traveller feels who meets a fellow citizen in a far-off land.

"Even such a face must the Blessed Agnes have had," he thought, his mind reverting to his favourite Saint; "she is like the lilies in the garth at home."

It was a strange comparison, for the girl was extravagantly dressed in costly materials and brilliant colours, her hair coifed in the foolish French fashion of the day; and yet, despite it all, she looked a nun. Her face was

pale, her brows set straight; her eyes, save when she was much moved, were like grey shadows veiling an unknown soul; her mouth, delicately curved, was scarcely reddened; her head drooped slightly on her long, slender neck, a gesture instinct with gracious humility. She was like a pictured saint: Hilarius' gaze clung to her, followed her as she left the hall, and saw her still as he sat apart while the serving men cleared the lower tables and brought in the sleeping gear for the night. He lay down with the rest, and through the high lancet windows the moonlight kissed his white and weary face as it was wont to do on bright nights in the cloister dormitory. Around him men lay sleeping soundly after the day's toil; there was none to heed, and he sobbed like a little homesick child, until his tired youth triumphed and he fell asleep, to dream of Martin and the Prior, the lady at the raised table, and the pale, sweet lilies in the cloister garth.

PART II

THE FLOWER

CHAPTER I

THE CITY OF PURE GOLD

"BLIND eyes, blind eyes!" sang the dancer.

Hilarius woke with a start. He had fallen asleep on a bench in the sunny courtyard and his dream had carried him back to the forest. He sat rubbing his eyes and only half-awake, the sun kissing his hair into a halo against the old grey wall. A falcon near fretted restlessly on her perch, and a hound asleep by the fountain rose, and, slowly stretching its great limbs, came towards him.

It was four o'clock on a warm day in September; the courtyard was deserted save for a few busied serving-men, and the knight and his household were at a tilting in the Outer Bailey, all but the Lady Eleanor, Hilarius' mistress, for, as Martin had foreseen, Sir John had so appointed it.

It was now two months since Hilarius had come to the city which had seemed to him in the distance as the New Jerusalem full of promise; but he had found no angels at the gates, nor were the streets full of the

righteous; nay, the place seemed nearer of kin to the Babylon of Blessed John's Vision—with a few holy ones who would surely be caught up ere judgment fell, amongst them Sir John and Lady Eleanor.

A good knight and a God-fearing man was Sir John, tender to his children, gentle with his people, a faithful servant to God and King Edward; shrewd withal, and an apt reader of men. Therefore, and because of the love he bore to Prior Stephen, he set Hilarius to attend his eldest daughter, who seemed to belong as little to this world as the lad himself; and felt that in so doing he had achieved the best possible for his old friend, according to his asking.

Hilarius for his part served the Lady Eleanor as an acolyte tends the chapel of a saint, only she was further removed from him than a saint, by reason of her pale humanity. He soon perceived, as he watched her at banquet, tourney, or pageant, that she went to a revel as to the Sacrament, and sat at a mummers' show with eyes fixed on the Unseen. She moved through the gay vivid world of Court gallants and joyous maidens like a shadow, and the rout grew graver at her coming.

It was much the same with her lover, Guy de Steyning —brother of that Hugh de Steyning men wot of as Brother Ambrosius—a gentle knight with mild blue eyes, a peaked red beard, and great fervour for heavenly

things. The pair liked one another well; but their time was taken up with preparation for Paradise rather than with earthly business, and their speech lent itself more readily to devout phrases than to lovers' vows. It was small wonder, therefore, that another year saw them both by glad consent in the cloister, he at Oxford, and Eleanor in the Benedictine House of which her aunt was Prioress.

Hilarius had written of his saintly mistress to Prior Stephen just as he had written of the wondrous beauty of St Peter's Abbey: "With all its straight, slender, upstanding pillars, methinks 'tis like the forest at home," (forgetting that his more intimate knowledge of the forest partook of the nature of sin). "The Lady Eleanor, my honoured mistress," he wrote, "is a most saintly and devout maiden, full of heavenly lore and caring naught for the things of this world"; and he added, "'tis beautiful to see such devotion where for the most part are sinful and light-minded persons."

The Prior laid the script aside with a smile and a sigh; and when Brother Bernard asked news of the lad answered a little sadly, "Nay, Brother, he still sleeps"; and indeed there seemed no waking him to a world of men—living, striving, sorely-tried men.

He dwelt in a land of his own making—a land of colour and light and shadow in which much that he

saw played a part; only the gorgeous pageants turned to hosts of triumphant saints heralded by angels; while the knights at a tourney in their brave armour pictured St George, St Michael, or St Martin in his dreams.

It was a limner he longed to be, far away from the stir and stress, not a page attending a great lady to the Court functions. He yearned ever after the Scriptorium, with its busied monks and stores of colour and gold. It lay but a stone's throw away behind the jealous Monastery walls, but it was no part of Prior Stephen's plan that the lad should go straight from one cloister to another.

To Hilarius, sitting on the bench in the sun, came one of Eleanor's tirewomen to bid him wait on her mistress. He rose at once and followed her through the hall and up the winding stair, along a gallery hung with wondrous story-telling tapestry, to the bower where Eleanor sat with two of her women busied with their needle.

Hilarius found his mistress, her hands idle on her knee. He louted low, and she bade him bring a stool and sit beside her.

"I am weary," she said; "this life is weariness. Tell me of the Monastery and the forest—stay, tell me rather of the New Jerusalem that Brother Ambrose saw and limned."

Hilarius, nothing loth, settled himself at her feet,

'Hilarius found his mistress, her hands idle on her knee'

Hilarius found his mistress, her hands
idle on her knee.

elbow on knee and chin on his open hands, his dreamy blue eyes gazing away out of the window at the cloud-flecked sky above the Abbey pinnacles.

"The Brother Ambrose," he began, "was ever a saintly man, approved of God and beloved by the Brethren; ay, and a crafty limner, save that of late his eyesight failed him. To him one night, as he lay a-bed in the dormitory, came the word of the Lord, saying: 'Come, and I will show thee the Bride, the Lamb's wife.' And Brother Ambrose arose and was carried to a great and high mountain, even as in the Vision of Blessed John. 'Twas a still night of many stars, and Brother Ambrose, looking up, saw a radiant path in the heavens; and lo! the stars gathered themselves together on either side until they stood as walls of light, and the four winds lapped him about as in a mantle and bore him towards the wondrous gleaming roadway. Then between the stars came the Holy City with roof and pinnacle aflame, and walls aglow with such colours as no earthly limner dreams of, and much gold. Brother Ambrose beheld the Gates of Pearl, and by every gate an angel, with wings of snow and fire, and a face no man dare look on, because of its exceeding radiance.

"Then, as Brother Ambrose stretched out his arms because of his great longing, a little grey cloud came out of the north and hung between the walls of light, so that

he no longer beheld the Vision, but heard only a sound as of a great multitude crying ' Alleluia ' ; and suddenly the winds came about him again, and lo ! he found himself in bed in the dormitory, and it was midnight, for the bell was ringing to Matins ; and he rose and went down with the rest ; but when the Brethren left the choir, Brother Ambrose stayed fast in his place, hearing and seeing nothing because of the Vision of God ; and at Lauds they found him and told the Prior.

" He questioned Brother Ambrose of the matter, and when he heard the Vision, bade him limn the Holy City even as he had seen it ; and the Precentor gave him uterine vellum and much fine gold and what colours he asked for the work. Then Brother Ambrose limned a wondrous fair city of gold with turrets and spires ; and he inlaid blue for the sapphire, and green for the emerald, and vermilion where the city seemed aflame with the glory of God ; but the angels he could not limn, nor could he set the rest of the colours as he saw them, nor the wall of stars on either hand ; and Brother Ambrose fell sick because of the exceeding great longing he had to limn the Holy City, and was very sad ; but our Prior bade him thank God and remember the infirmity of the flesh, which, like the little grey cloud, veiled Jerusalem to his sight."

There was silence. Lady Eleanor clasped her shadowy blue-veined hands under her chin, and in her eyes too was a great longing.

"It seemeth to me small wonder that Brother Ambrose fell sick," she said, at length.

Hilarius nodded:

"He had ever a patient, wistful look as of one from home; and often he would sit musing in the cloister and scarce give heed to the Office bell."

"Methinks, Hilarius, it will be passing sweet to dwell in that Holy City."

"Nay, lady," said her page tenderly, "surely thou hast had a vision even as Brother Ambrose, for thine eyes wait always, like unto his."

Eleanor shook her head, and two tears crept slowly from the shadow of her eyes.

"Nay, not to such as I am is the vision vouchsafed; though my desire is great, 'tis ever clogged by sin; and for this same reason I would get me to a cloister where I might fast and pray unhindered."

Hilarius looked at her with great compassion.

"Sweet lady, the Lord fulfil all thy desires; yet, methinks, thou art already as one of His saints."

"Nay, but a poor sinner in an evil world," she answered. "Sing to me, Hilarius."

And he sang her the *Salve Regina*, and when it was

ended she bade him go, for she would fain spend some time in prayer upon her primer.

"Our Lady and all Saints be with thee, sweet mistress!" he said, and left her to sob out once more the sins and sorrows of her tender childlike heart.

CHAPTER II

THE CITY THAT HILARIUS SAW

Hilarius went back to the courtyard, his soul full of trouble. He leant against the fountain, playing with the cool water which fell with monotonous rhythm into the shallow time-worn basin. The cloudless sky smiled back at him from the broken mirror into which he gazed, and the glory of its untroubled blue thrilled him strangely. He too had a vision which he longed to limn; but it was of earth, not Heaven like that vouchsafed to Brother Ambrose; and yet none the less precious, for was it not the Monastery at home which so haunted him, the grey familiar walls with their girdle of sunlit pasture, and the mantling forest which bowed and swayed at the will of the whispering wind?

"As well seek Heaven's gate in yon fair reflection as learn to love in this light-minded, deceitful city," Hilarius said to himself a little bitterly. He deemed that he had plumbed its hollowness and learnt the full measure of its vanity. Already he shunned the company and diversions of his fellow pages, though he was ever

ready to serve them. A prentice lad's homely brawl set him shivering; a woman's jest painted his cheeks 'til they rivalled a young maid's at her first wooing. He plucked aside his skirts and walked in judgment; only wherever mountebank or juggler held the crowd enthralled, there Hilarius, half-ashamed, would push his way, in the unacknowledged hope of seeing again the maid whose mother, like his own, was light o' love: a strange link truly to bind Hilarius in his blindness to the rest of poor sinful humanity.

Suddenly there broke on his musing the clatter of horse-hoofs, and a gay young page came spurring with bent head under the low archway. He reined up by Hilarius:

"Dear lad, kind lad, wilt thou do me a service?"

"That will I, Hal, an it be in my power."

"Take this purse, then, to the Cock Tavern and give it mine host. 'Tis Luke Langland's reckoning; he left it with me yesternight, but my head was full of feast and tourney, and 'tis yet undelivered. Mine host will not let the serving men and the two horses go 'til he hath seen Luke's money, and I cannot stay, for my lord will need me."

Hilarius took the purse; and his fellow page, blessing him for a good comrade, clattered back through the gateway.

The streets were full of life and colour; serving-men in the livery of Abbat and Knight, King and Cardinal, lounged at the tavern doors dicing, gaming, and drinking. Hilarius walked delicately and strove to shut eyes and ears to the sights and sounds of sin. He delivered the purse, only to hear mine host curse roundly because it was lighter than the reckoning; and after being hustled and jeered at for a milk-faced varlet by the men who stood drinking, he sought with scarlet cheeks for a less frequented way.

The quiet of a narrow street invited him; he turned aside, and suddenly traffic and turmoil died away. He was in a city within a city; a place of mean tenements, wretched hovels, ruined houses, and, keeping guard over them all, a grim square tower, blind save for two windowed eyes. Men, ill-favoured, hang-dog, or care-worn, stood about the house doors silent and moody; a white-faced woman crossing the street with a bucket gave no greeting; the very children rolling in the foul gutters neither laughed nor chattered nor played. The city without seemed very far from this dismal, sordid place.

Hilarius felt a touch on his shoulder, and a kindly voice said :—

"How now, young sir, for what crime dost thou take sanctuary?"

He looked up and saw an old man in the black dress of an ecclesiastic, the keys of St Peter broidered on his arm.

"Sanctuary," stammered Hilarius, "nay, good sir, I——"

The other laughed.

"Wert thou star-gazing, then, that thou could'st stray into these precincts and know it not? This is the City of Refuge, to which a man may flee when he has robbed or murdered his fellow, or been guilty of treason, seditious talk, or slander—a strange place in which to see such a face as thine."

"I did but seek a quiet way home and lost the turning," said Hilarius; "in sooth, 'tis a fearful place."

"Ay, boy, 'tis a place of darkness and despair, despite its safety—even the King's arm falls short when a man is in these precincts: but from himself and the knowledge of his crime, a man cannot flee; hence, I say,'tis a place of darkness and despair."

The unspoken question shone in Hilarius' eyes, and the other answered it.

"Nay, there is no blood on my soul, young sir. 'Twas good advice I gave, well meant but ill received, so here I dwell to learn the wisdom of fools and the foolishness of wisdom."

"Does the Abbat know what evil men these

are that seek the shelter of Holy Church?" asked Hilarius, perplexed.

"Most surely he knows; but what would'st thou have? It hath ever been the part of the Church to embrace sinners with open arms lest they repent. A man leaves wrath behind him when he flees hither; but should he set foot in the city without, he is the law's and no man may gainsay it."

"Nay, sir, but these look far from repentance," said Hilarius.

"Ay, ay, true eno'," rejoined the other cheerfully, "but then 'tis not for nothing Mother Church holds the keys. Man's law may fail to reach, but there is ever hell-fire for the unrepented sinner."

Hilarius nodded, and his eyes wandered over the squalid place with the North Porch of the Abbey for its sole beauty.

"It must be as hell here, to live with robbers and men with bloody hands."

"Nay," said the old man hastily, "many of them are kindly folk, and many have slain in anger without thought. 'Tis a sad place, though, and thy young face is like a sunbeam on a winter's day. Come, I will show thee thy road."

He led Hilarius through the winding alleys, and set him once more on the edge of the city's stir and hum.

"I can no further," he said, "Farewell, young sir, and God keep thee! An old man's blessing ne'er harmed any one."

Hilarius gave him godden, and sped swiftly back through the streets crowded with folks returning from the tourney. The Abbey bell rang out above the shouts and din.

"'Tis an evil, evil world," quoth young Hilarius.

CHAPTER III

A SENDING FROM THE LORD

October and November came and sped, and Hilarius' longing to be a limner waxed with the waning year. One day by the waterside he met Martin, of whom he saw now much, now little, for the Minstrel followed the Court.

"The cage grows too small for me, lad," he said, as he stood with Hilarius watching the sun sink below the Surrey uplands; "ay, and I love one woman, which is ill for a man of my trade. I must be away to my mistress, winter or no winter, else my song will die and my heart break."

"'Tis even so with me, good Martin," said Hilarius sadly; "I too would fain go forth and serve my mistress; but the cage door is barred, and I may not open it from within."

Martin whistled, and smote the lad friendly on the shoulder.

"Patience, lad, patience, thou art young yet. Eighteen this Martinmas, say you? In truth 'tis a great

age, but still leaves time and to spare. '*All things come to a waiting man,*' saith the proverb."

A week later he chanced on Hilarius sitting on a bench under the south wall of the farmery cloister. It was a mild, melancholy day, and suited the Minstrel's mood.

He sat down by him and told of King and Court; then, when Hilarius had once more cried his longing, he said gravely :—

"One comes who will open more cage doors than thine and mine, lad—and yet earn no welcome."

Hilarius looked at him questioningly.

"Lad, hast thou ever seen Death?"

"Nay, good Martin."

"It comes, lad, it comes; or I am greatly at fault. I saw the Plague once in Flanders, and fled against the wind, and so came out with a clean skin; now I am like to see it again; for it has landed in the south, and creeps this way. Mark my words, lad, thou wilt know Death ere the winter is out, and such as God keep thee from."

Hilarius understood little of these words but the sound of them, and turned to speak of other things.

Martin looked at him gloomily.

"Best get back to the cloister and Prior Stephen, lad."

"Nay, good Martin, that may not be; but I have still a letter for the Abbat of St Alban's, and would

'One comes who will open more cage doors
than thine and mine, lad'

C F B

hasten thither if Sir John would set me free. Methinks I am a slow scholar," went on poor Hilarius ruefully, "for I have not yet gone hungry—and as for love, methinks there are few folk to love in this wicked city."

Martin laughed and then grew grave again.

"Maybe he comes who will teach thee both, and yet I would fain find thee a kinder master. Well, well, lad, get thee to St Alban's an it be possible; thou art best in a cloister, methinks, for all thy wise Prior Stephen may say."

And he went off singing—

"Three felons hung from a roadside tree,
One black and one white and one grey;
And the ravens plucked their eyes away
From one and two and three,
That honest men might see
And thievish knaves should pay;
Lest these might be
As blind as they.
Ah, well-a-day, well-a-day!
One—two—three! On the gallows-tree
hung they."

Hilarius listened with a smile until the last notes of Martin's voice had died away, and then fell a-musing of hunger and love, the dancer and the Prior.

Suddenly, as if his thought had taken speech, he heard a voice say:

"I hunger, I hunger, feed me, most sweet Manna, for I hunger—I hunger, and I love."

He sprang to his feet, but there was no one in sight. Again the shrill quavering voice called:

"Love of God, I hunger, Love of God, I die. Blessed Peter, pray for me! Blessed Michael, defend me!"

Hilarius knew now; it was the Ankret, that holy man who for sixty years had fasted and prayed in his living tomb at the corner of the cloister. He was held a saint above all the ankrets before him, and wondrous wise; the King himself had sought his counsel, and the Convent held him in high esteem.

Again the voice: Hilarius strove to reach up to the grated window of the cell—it was too high above him. An overpowering desire came upon him to ask the Ankret of his future. With a spring he caught at the window's upright bars; his cap flew off and he hung barehearded, the sun behind him, gazing into the cell.

On his knees was an old man whose long white hair lay in matted locks upon his shoulders, and whose beard fell far below his girdle. The skin of his face was like grey parchment, and his deep-set eyes glowed strangely in their hollow cavities.

Hilarius strove to speak, but words failed him.

The Ankret, looking up, saw the beautiful face at his window with its aureole of yellow hair, and stretched out his bony withered hands.

"Blessed Michael, Blessed Michael, the messenger of the Lord!" he cried, gaining strength from the vision.

"What would'st thou, Father?" said Hilarius, afraid.

"Nay, who am I that I should speak? and yet, and yet——" the old man's voice grew weaker —"the Bread of Heaven that I may die in peace."

He stretched out his hands again entreatingly, and Hilarius was sore perplexed.

"Dost thou crave speech of the Abbat, my Father?"

The Ankret looked troubled.

"Blessed Michael, Blessed Michael!" he murmured entreatingly.

Hilarius' hands hurt him sore; it was clear that the holy man saw some wondrous vision, and 'twas no time to gain speech of him.

"Blessed Michael, Blessed Michael!" quavered the old, tired voice.

Hilarius felt himself slipping; with a great effort he held fast and braced himself against the wall.

"Blessed Michael, Blessed Michael!"—The appeal in the half-dead face was awful.

Hilarius' grip failed; he slid to the ground, bruised and sore from the unaccustomed strain, but well pleased. True, he had gained no counsel from the Ankret, but he had seen the holy man—ay, even when he was visited by a heavenly messenger, and that in itself should bring a blessing. He turned to go, when a sudden thought came to him. There was no one in sight, no sound but the failing cry from the tired old saint. Hilarius doffed his cap again and his fresh young voice rose clear and sweet through the thin still air:—

"Iesu, dulcis memoria,
Dans vera cordis gaudia;
Sed super mel et omnia
Dulcis ejus praesentia."

At the fourth stanza his memory failed him; but he could hear the Ankret crooning to himself the words he had sung, and crying softly like a little child.

Hilarius went home with wonder in his heart, but said no word of what had befallen him; and that night the Ankret died, and the Sub-Prior gave him the last sacraments.

Next day it was known that a vision had been vouch-

safed the holy man before his end; and that the Prince of Angels himself had brought his message of release: and Hilarius, greatly content to think that the Blessed Michael had indeed been so near him, kept his own counsel.

He told Lady Eleanor of Martin's words.

"God save the King!" she said, and went into her oratory to pray: and there was need of prayer, for the Minstrel's foreboding was no idle one. Ere London knew it the Plague was at her gates; yet the King, undeterred, came to spend Christmas at Westminster; but Martin was not in his train. Men's mirth waxed hot by reason of the terror they would not recognise. Banquet and revel, allegory and miracle play; pageant of beautiful women and brave men; junketing, ay, and rioting—thus they flung a defiance at the enemy; and then fled: for across the clash of the feast bells sounded the mournful note of funeral dirge and requiem.

Eleanor, knowing Hilarius' ardent longing for school and master, prayed her father to send him on the way to St Alban's instead of keeping him with them to follow a fugitive Court. The good knight, feeling one page more or less mattered little when Death was so ready to serve, and anxious for the lad's safety and well-being, assented gladly enough. So it came to pass that on the Feast of the Three Kings Hilarius

found himself on the Watling Street Way, a well-filled purse in his pocket, but a fearful heart under his jerkin ; for the Death he had never seen loomed large, a great king, and by all accounts a most mighty hunter.

CHAPTER IV

BLIND EYES WHICH COULD SEE

It is, for the most part, the moneyed man who flees from the face of Death; the poor man awaits him quietly, with patient indifference, in the field or under his own roof-tree; ay, and often flings the door wide for the guest, or hastens his coming. Thus it came to pass that while the stricken poor agonised in the grip of unknown horror, bishop and merchant, prince and chapman, fine ladies in gorgeous litters, abbesses with their train of nuns, and many more, fled north, east, and west from the pestilent cities, and encumbered the roads with much traffic. One procession, and one only, did Hilarius meet making its way to London.

It was a keen frosty day; there had been little previous rain or snow, and the roads were dry; the trees in the hedgerows, bare and stricken skeletons, stood out sharp and black against a cold grey sky. Suddenly the sound of a mournful chant smote upon the still air, music and words alike strange. The singers came slowly up the roadway, men of foreign

aspect walking with bent heads, their dark, matted locks almost hiding their wild, fixed eyes and thin, haggard faces. They were stripped to the waist, their backs torn and bleeding, and carried each a bloody scourge wherewith to strike his fellow. At the third step they signed the sign of the Cross with their prostrate bodies on the ground; and thus in blood and penitence they went towards London.

Hilarius was familiar with the exercise but not with the manner of it. These strange, wild men filled him with horror, and he shrank back with the rest. Then a man sprang from among the watching crowd, tore off jerkin and shirt, and flung up his arms to heaven with a great sob.

"I left wife and children to perish alone," he cried, "and fled to save my miserable skin. Now may God have mercy on my soul, for I go back. Smite, and smite hard, brother!" and he stepped in front of the first flagellant.

At this there arose a cry from the folk that looked on, and many fell on their knees and confessed their sins, accusing themselves with groanings and tears; but Hilarius, seized with sudden terror, turned and fled blindly, without thought of direction, his eyes wide, the blood drumming in his ears, a great horror at his heels — a horror that could drive a man from

wife and child, that had driven brave Martin to flee against the wind, and all his folk to leave house and home to save that which most men count dearer than either.

At last, exhausted and panting, he stayed to rest, and saw, coming towards him, a blind friar. Hilarius had turned into a by-way in the hurry of his terror, and they two were alone. The friar was a small, mean-looking man, feeling his way by the aid of hand and staff; his face upturned, craving the light. He stopped when he came up with Hilarius, and turned his sightless eyes on him; a fire burnt in the dead ashes.

"Art thou that son of Christ waiting to guide my steps, as the Lord promised me?"

Hilarius started back, afraid at the strange address; but the friar laid one lean hand on his arm, and, letting the staff slip back against his shoulder, felt Hilarius' face, not with the light and practised touch of the blind, but slowly and carefully, frowning the while.

"Son, thou wilt come with me?"

"Nay, good Father, I may not; I am for St Alban's."

"Whence, my son?"

"From Westminster, good Father."

"Nay, then, thou mayest spare shoe-leather. I left the Monastery but now, and, I warrant thee, they

promise small welcome to those from pestilent cities. What would'st thou with the Abbat ? "

Hilarius told him.

The friar flung up his hands.

" *Laus Deo ! Laus Deo !* " he cried, " now I know thou art in very truth the lad of my dream. Listen, my son, and I will tell thee all. Thrice has the vision come to me ; I see the mother who bore me carried away, struggling and cursing, by men in black apparel, and Hell is near at hand, belching out smoke and flame, and many hideous devils ; yet the place is little Bungay, where my mother hath a cot by the river. When first the dream came I lay at Mechlin in the Monastery there ; my flesh quaked and my hair stood up by reason of the awfulness of the vision ; then as I mused and prayed I saw in it the call of the Lord, that I might wrestle with Satan for my mother's soul, for she was ever inclined to evil arts and spells, and thought little of aught save gain.

" Forthwith I suffered no man to stay me, and set off, the Plague at my heels ; but ever out-stripping it, I was careful to preach its coming in every place, that men might turn and repent. Then as I tarried on the seaboard for a ship the Plague came ; and because I had preached its coming, the people rose in wrath, and, falling upon me, roughly handled me. They beat

me full sore in the market-place; then, piercing my eyeballs, set me adrift in a small boat.

"Two days and two nights I lay at the mercy of the sea, darkness and light alike to me, and with no thought of time; for the flames of hell burnt in my eyes, and a worse anguish in my heart because of my mother's soul."

"And then, and then?" cried Hilarius breathlessly, tears of pure pity in his eyes.

"Then the Lord cared for me even as He cared for the Prophet Jonas, and sent a ship that His message might not be hindered. The shipmen were kindly folk, but we were driven out of our course by a great wind, and at last came on shore in Lincolnshire. I have come south thus far by the aid of Christian men, but time presses; and now, lo! thou art here to guide me."

"But, my Father," said poor Hilarius, seeing yet another barrier in the way of his desires, "'tis a limner I would be; and I am from Westminster, not London, and then there is Prior Stephen's letter——"

The friar held up his hand:

"Thou shalt be a limner, my son, the Lord hath revealed it to me. Last night the vision came again, and a voice cried: 'Speed, for a son of Christ waits by the way to guide thy steps,' and lo! thou art here, waiting by the way, as the voice said. And now, son,

an thou wilt come thou shalt take thy letter to Wymondham—'tis a cell of this Abbey—for there is Brother Andreas from overseas who hath wondrous skill with the brush; he will teach thee, for thou shalt say to him that Brother Amadeus sent thee, who is now as Bartimeus, waiting for the light of the Lord; but first thou shalt set me in the village of Bungay, where my mother dwelleth."

Hilarius listened, gazing awestruck at the withered eyes that vainly questioned his face. He had forgotten plague, death, flagellants, in this absorbing tale of the man of God, who was even as one of the blessed martyrs. Brother Andreas! A skilled limner! How should he, Hilarius, gainsay one with a vision from the Lord?

"I obey, my Father," he cried joyously, taking the friar's hand; and they two passed swiftly down the road, their faces to the east.

CHAPTER V

THE WHITE WAY AND WHERE IT LED

It was a bitterly cold night and St Agnes' Eve; the snow fell heavily, caught into whirling eddies by the keen north wind. Hilarius and the Friar, crossing an empty waste, or bleak unprotected heath, met the full force of the blast, and each moment the snow grew denser, the darkness more complete. They struggled on, breathless, beaten, exhausted and lost; Hilarius, leading the Friar by one hand, held the other across his bent head to shield himself from the buffets of the wind.

Suddenly he stood fast.

"I can no more, Father," he said, "the snow is as a wall; there is naught to see or to hear; I deem we are far from our right way." His voice was very weak, and he caught at the Friar for support.

"I will pray the Lord, my son, that He open thine eyes, even as He opened the eyes of the prophet's servant in the besieged city; so shalt thou see an host

of angels encompassing us, for we are about the Lord's business."

"Nay, my Father," said Hilarius feebly, "I see no angels, and I perish." He tottered, and would have fallen, but the Friar caught him in his arms. A moment he stood irresolute, the boy on his breast, then flung away his staff and lifted him to his shoulder.

With unerring, confident step he went forward through the snow, a white figure bearing a white burden in a white world. All at once the wind dropped, the blinding shower ceased, and Hilarius, rested and comforted, spoke :—

"Is it thou, my Father ?"

"It is I, my son, but angels are on either hand and go before to guide. The snow hath ceased, canst thou walk ?"

He set Hilarius gently on his feet, and lo ! he found the stars alight !

The boy gave a cry, and forgetting his companion's darkness, pointed to the left, where lay a snow-clad village.

"A miracle, a miracle, my Father !"

"A miracle, i' faith, my son : the Lord hath given guidance to the blind as He promised. Let us go down."

They went by the white way under the stars; and Hilarius was full of awe and comfort because of the angels of God which attended on a poor friar.

At a village hostel they found rough but friendly entertainment and several guests. They dried themselves at a roaring fire, and Hilarius made a hearty meal; the Friar would eat nothing save a morsel of bread.

A messenger was there, a short stout man with stubbly beard, bright black eyes like beads, and a high colour. He was riding with despatches from the King to the Abbat at Bury, and had fearful tales to tell of the Plague; how in London they piled the dead in trenches, while many who escaped the pest died of want and cold; it was a city of the dead rather than the living. One great lord, travelling post-haste from Westminster, had been found by his servants to have the disorder, and they fled, leaving him by the wayside to perish.

Hilarius heard, horror-struck.

"'Tis a grievous shame so to desert a sick master," he said.

"Nay, lad," said a chapman in the corner, "but a man loves his own skin best."

"Ay, ay," said a fat ruddy-faced miller, overtaken by the storm on his way to a neighbouring

village, "a man's own skin before all. Fill your belly first and your neighbour's afterwards. Live and let live."

"Ay, let live," chimed in mine host, bustling in with a stoop of cider for the chapman, "but, by the Rood, 'tis cruel work when two lone women are murdered for a bit of mouldy bacon and a lump of bread; for I'se warrant 'tis a long day sin' they had more than that at best."

The chapman took his cider.

"Where was this work done?" he said.

"Nay, where but here on the bruary! The women were found Wednesday se'n-night by the herd as he went folding. They lay on the floor in their blood."

Hilarius turned sick. In Westminster, by some miracle, he had been spared the sight of violent death—ay, or of death in any form—and had seen nothing worse than a rogue in the stocks, for which sight he had thanked Heaven piously.

"'Tis the fault of the rich," said a voice, and Hilarius saw, to his surprise, that there was a second friar in the room; a tall, bullet-headed man, with a heavy, obstinate jaw ornamented with a scanty fringe of black hair.

"The rich grow fat, and the poor starve," he went

'At a village hostel they found rough but friendly entertainment'

'At a village hostel they found rough
but friendly entertainment.'

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on, " 'tis hunger makes a man kill his brother for a mouthful of mouldy bacon."

" Nay," said the miller, " there was no need to kill, Father. A man could have taken the meat from two lone women and left them their lives."

" Why take from folk as poor as themselves ? " said mine host. " Let them rob the rich an they must rob."

" Ay," said the friar, " rob the rich, say you, take their own, say I. God did not make this world that one man should be over full and another go empty ; nor is it religion that the monks should live on the fat o' the land and grind the faces of the poor. How many manors, think you, has the Abbat of St Edmund's and how many on his land lack bread ? "

Hilarius listened, scarlet with indignation, a flood of wrathful defence pent at his lips, for the blind friar laid a restraining hand on his sleeve.

Mine host scratched his head doubtfully. The teaching was seditious, and made a man liable to stocks and pillory ; but it tickled the ears of the common folk and 'twas ill to quarrel with the Mendicants. Help came to him in perplexity : a loud knocking on the barred door made the guests within start.

" 'Tis eight o' the clock," said the miller, affrighted, for he had a heavy purse on him.

"Let them knock and cool their hot heads," said the seditious friar composedly.

The rest nodded approval.

Then a man's voice threatened without.

"What ho! unbar the door. Is this a night to keep a man without? Open, open, or, by the Mass, thou shalt smart for it."

Mine host shook his head fearfully, and his fat cheeks trembled; he moved slowly and unwillingly to the door and took down the stout wooden bar. As it swung back the door flew open, and a man burst in, at sight of whom mine host turned yet paler.

"Food and drink," said the new-comer sharply, flinging himself on a bench by the fire.

Hilarius thought he had never seen so strange a fellow. His hair was close cropped; ay, and his ears also. His eyes were very small and near together; his nose a shapeless lump; his lip drawn up showed two rat-like teeth. Silence fell on the company, and the chapman, who had been searching amongst his goods for something wherewith to pay his hospitality, was hastily putting them back, when the man, looking up, caught sight of a bundle of oaten pipes among the miscellaneous wares. He plucked one to him, and in a moment the air was full of tender liquid notes—a thrush's roundelay. Then a blackbird called and his mate answered; a

cuckoo cried the spring-song; a linnet mourned with lifting cadence; a nightingale poured forth her deathless love.

Mine host came in with a dish piled high and a stoop of mead; the man threw the pipe from him with a rough oath and fell to ravenously on the victuals. He held his head low and ate brutishly amid dead silence; then he looked up and cursed at them for their sorry mood.

"What! Hugh pipes and never a word of thanks nor a jest? Damn you all for dull dogs!"

The blind friar rose and fixed his withered eyes on the man's dreadful face.

"Piping Hugh of Mildenhall," he said, and at his voice the man leapt to his feet and thrust his arm out as if for protection. "Piping Hugh of Mildenhall," said the Friar again, "I have a message for thee from the Lord God. I cried thee damned in my own name once, when thou did'st take my little sister to shame and death; now I cry thee thrice damned in the name of the Lord, for the cup of thine iniquity is full and thy hands red with blood. Man hath branded thee; now God will set His mark on thee and all men shall see it. The Plague will come and come swiftly, but it shall not touch thee; many shall die in their sins; thou shalt live on with thine. A brute thou art, and with brutes thou shalt herd; thou shalt howl as a ravening wolf, and as

such men shall hunt thee from their doors. Thou shalt seek death, even as Cain sought and found it not, because of the mark of the Lord. Thou art damned, thrice damned; thy speech shall go from thee, thy sight fail thee, thy mind be darkened; thou art given over to the Evil One, and he shalt torment thee with remembrance."

There was dead silence; then with a long shrill howl the man tore open the door, dashed from the house, and fled, a black blotch upon the whiteness of the night.

The guests huddled together aghast, and no man moved, until Hilarius, full of pride at his Friar's powers, stepped forward to close the door. He was too late; it swung to with a loud crash like the sound of doom. The Friar sank back composedly on the bench, and the company began in silence to make preparation for the night. When all was ordered, Hilarius bade the Friar come, and he rose at the lad's voice and touch. Then he crossed to where the others stood apart eyeing him fearfully.

He laid his hand on the miller's breast and said in a clear, low voice: "Thou wilt die, brother."

He laid his hand on the messenger's breast: "Thou wilt die, brother."

He laid his hand on the chapman's breast: "Thou wilt die, brother."

He laid his hand on mine host's breast: "Thou wilt die, brother."

Then he came to the other Friar who stood at a little distance, his face dark with anger and fear, and laid his hand on his breast: "Thou wilt live, my brother—and repent."

CHAPTER VI

A DARK FINDING

It is a far cry from St Alban's to Bungay—which village of the good ford lies somewhat south-east of Norwich, five leagues distant—and the journey is doubled in the winter time. Hilarius and the Friar were long on the road, for January's turbulent mood had imprisoned them many days, and early February had proved little kinder. They had companied with strange folk, light women and brutal men; but, for the most part, coarse word and foul jest were hushed in the presence of the blind friar and the lad with the wondering eyes. In every village the Friar preached and called on men to repent and be saved, for Death's shadow was already upon them. Folk wondered and gaped—the Plague was still only a name ten leagues east of London—but many repented and confessed and made restitution, though some heard with idle ears, remembering the prophecy of Brother Robert who had come with the same message half a man's lifetime before, and that no evil had followed his preaching.

At last St Matthias' Eve saw Hilarius and the Friar at St Edmund's Abbey. There were many guests for the Convent's hospitality that night, and as Hilarius entered the hall of the guest-house—a brother had charged himself with the care of the Friar—he heard the sound of the vielle, and a rich voice which sang in good round English, against the fashion of the day.

"Martin, Martin!" he cried.

The vielle was instantly silent.

"Holà, lad!" cried the Minstrel, springing to his feet; he caught Hilarius to him and embraced him heartily.

"Why, lad, not back in thy monastery? Nay, but I made sure the Plague would send thee flying home, and instead I find thee strayed farther afield." Then, seeing the injured faces round him for that the song was not ended, he drew Hilarius to the bench beside him and took up his vielle. "Be still now, lad, 'til I have finished my ditty for this worshipful company; then, an't please thee to tell it, I will hear thy tale."

The guests, who had looked somewhat sour at the interruption, unpursed their lips, and settled to listen as the minstrel took up his song:—

"The fair maid came to the old oak tree
(Sun and wind and a bird on the bough),
The throstle he sang merrily—merrily—merrily,

But the fair maid wept, for sad was she, sad was she,
Her sweet knight—Oh! where was he?
He lay dead in the cold, cold ground
(Moon and stars and rain on the hill),
In his side and breast was a bloody wound.
Woe, woe is me for the fair ladye, and the poor knight he,
The poor knight—Ah! cold was he.
The maiden sat her down to die
(Cold, cold earth on her lover's breast),
And the little birds sang mournfully,
And the moonshine kissed her tenderly,
And the stars looked down right pityingly
On the poor fair maid and the poor cold knight.
Ah misery, dear misery, sweet misery!"

This mournful song was no sooner ended than supper was served; and the company proved themselves good trenchermen. Hilarius caught sight of the seditious friar making short work of the Convent's victuals, and marvelled to see him in a place to which he had given so evil a name.

Martin was unfeignedly glad to see the lad, and listened intently to his tale. He nodded his head as Hilarius related how the friar he companied with preached in each village that men should repent ere the scourge of God fell upon them; "but there is naught of it as yet," said the lad.

"Nay, nay, it is like a thief in the night. One day it is not; and then the next, men sicken and fall like blasted wheat. I heard a bruit of London that it was

but a heap of graves—nay, one grave rather, for they flung the bodies into a great trench ; there was no time to do otherwise : Black Death is swift with his stroke."

Then Hilarius told of Piping Hugh and the Friar's death-words to the guests.

Martin swore a round oath and slapped his thigh.

" Now know I that thy Friar is a proper man an he has set a curse on Piping Hugh of Mildenhall ! A foul-mouthed knave, with many a black deed to his name and blood on his hands, if men say truth ; and yet there was never a bird that would not come at his call, and I never heard tell that he harmed one. What will thy Friar in Bungay, lad ? "

When he had heard the story of the Friar's twice-repeated vision and quest, the Minstrel sat silent awhile with knitted brow and head sunk on his breast ; then he eyed Hilarius half humorously, half tenderly.

" Methinks, lad, an thy Friar alloweth it, I will even go to Bungay with thee ; for I love thee well, lad, and would have thy company. Also I like not the matter of the vision and would fain see the end of it."

That night the dream came again to the Friar, and a voice cried : " Haste, haste, ere it be too late." And so Hilarius and Martin came to Bungay, the Friar guiding them, for the way was his own. None of the three ever saw St Edmund's Abbey again, for in one short month

the minster with its sister churches was turned to be a spital-house, while the dead lay in heaps, silently waiting to summon to their ghastly company the living that sought to make them a bed.

Quaint little Bungay lay snug enough in the embrace of the low vine-crowned hills which half encircled common and town. The Friar strode forward, straining in his pace like a leashed hound; Martin and Hilarius following. Once he stopped and turned a stricken face on his companions.

"What is that?" he said shrilly.

A magpie went ducking across the road, and Hilarius crossed himself fearfully.

"Let us make haste," cried the Friar when they told him; and so at full pace they came to Bungay town.

The place looked empty and deserted, but from the distance came the roar and hum of an angry crowd.

"The people are abroad," said Martin, and his face was very grave, "no doubt some knight is here, and there is a bear-baiting on the common. Prithee, where is thy mother's dwelling, good Father, and I will go and ask news of her?"

"'Tis a lonely hovel by the waterside not far from the Cattle Gate; Goody Wooten thou shalt ask for."

Martin went swiftly forward over the Common; Hilarius and the Friar followed more slowly, and when

they came to the Cattle Gate they stood fast and waited, the Friar turning his head anxiously and straining to make his ears do a double service.

Hilarius, who had hitherto regarded Bungay and the Friar's business as the last stage of his journey to Wymondham and Brother Andreas, was full of foreboding; he watched Martin on the outskirts of the crowd, saw him throw up his hands with an angry gesture and point to the Friar. Then he fell to parleying with the people, but Hilarius was too far off to catch what was said.

"See, there, 'tis her son," Martin was saying vehemently; "yon holy friar hath seen this thing in a vision, but alack! he reads it otherwise; yea, and hath hasted hither from overseas to wrestle with the Evil One for his mother's soul—and now, and now——"

The crowd parted, and he saw the most miserable sight. An old woman lay on the ground by the river's edge; a bundle of filthy water-logged rags crowned by a bruised, vindictive face and grey hair smeared with filth and slime. She lay on her back a shapeless huddle; her right thumb tied to her left toe and so across: there was a rope about her middle, but in their hot haste they had not stayed to strip her.

Martin pressed forward, and then turning to the jeering, vengeful crowd:

"By Christ's Rood, this is an evil work ye have wrought," he said.

"Nay," said one of the bystanders, "but it was fair judgment, Minstrel. For years she hath worked her spells and black arts in this place, ay, and cattle have perished and women gone barren through her means. Near two days agone a child was lost and seen last near her door, ay, and never seen again. When we came to question her she cursed at us for meddling mischief-makers, and would but glare and spit, and swear she she knew naught of the misbegotten brat."

"Maybe 'twas true eno'," said Martin. "I hate these rough-cast witch-findings—'tis not a matter for man's judgment, unless 'tis sworn and proven in court before the Justiciary."

"Nay," joined in an old man, "what need of a Justice when God speaks? We did but thole her to the river to see if she would sink or swim. The witch did swim, as all can testify, her Master helping her; and seeing that, we drew her under—ay, and see her now as she lies, and say whether the Devil hath not set a mark on his own?"

Martin wrung his hands.

"For the love of Christ, lay her decently on her pallet, and say no word of this to yon holy man."

Moved by his earnest manner, one or two more kindly

folk busied themselves unfastening the ropes and thongs which bound the witch, and bore her to her wretched bed.

The people, in their previous eagerness, had torn down the front of the miserable hovel she called home, so all men could see the poor place and its dead dishonoured mistress.

Martin, finding his bidding accomplished, turned to meet Hilarius and the Friar who were now coming slowly across the wind-swept common. March mists gathered and draped the sluggish river; the dry reeds rattled dismally in the ooze and sedge. Hilarius shivered, and the Friar started nervously when Martin spoke.

"Friar," he said, "God comfort thee! After all thy pains thou art too late to speed thy mother's soul; she passed to-day, and lies even now awaiting burial at thy faithful hands."

The Friar drew a quick breath, and Hilarius questioned Martin with a look. The crowd parted to let them through, and hung their heads abashed in painful silence as the Friar, led by Hilarius, gave his blessing.

They were close to the mean hovel now, and he turned to Martin.

"Didst thou hear of her end, or did she die alone, for the people feared her?"

" Ay, she died alone," answered Martin, and muttered, " now God forgive me ! " under his breath.

As they went into the wretched shed the setting sun broke through the lowering grey clouds and shone full on the dead woman. It lighted each vicious line and hideous trait of the wrinkled, toothless face, and betrayed the mark of an evil life, surcharged with horrid fear.

Hilarius shrank back shuddering. Could this hideousness be death ? The Friar stepped forward, but Martin stayed him.

" Nay, touch her not, Father, it may be the pestilence as thou didst read in thy dream."

The Friar fell on his knees ; and, in the silence that followed was heard the drip, drip, drip, from the sodden rags on the beaten earth floor. The people without, staring open-mouthed and silent, saw the Friar look up ; his hand hastily outstretched touched the dank, muddy hair ; then he knew all, and fell on his face with an exceeding bitter cry. It was answered by another cry—the glad cry of a lost child that is found.

The Friar, standing in front of that hovel of death, preached to the cringing, terrified people, many of whom knelt and crouched in the down-trodden grass and quag. He threw up his arms, and turned his blind, anguished face to the setting sun.

" Woe to the rebellious children, saith the Lord, that take counsel but not of Me, that they may add sin to sin ! Darkness shall come upon them ; Death shall overtake them ; their place shall know them no more. Let them bare their backs to the scourge, let them confess and repent ere I visit them as I visited Sodom and Gomorrah, cities of the Plain.

" O ye people, ye have taken judgment in your hands and judged falsely withal ; but ye shall be judged in truth, yea, even according to your measure. Repent, repent, for Death cometh swiftly and maketh no long tarrying. It shall come ; it shall snatch men's souls away, even as ye have torn away my mother's soul, leaving no space for repentance."

He stretched his hands out over the common, and pointed to the little town.

" Your dwellings shall be desolate, and this place a place of heaps. Ye shall run hither and thither, seeking safety and finding none ; for the arm of the Lord is stretched out still because of the wickedness of the earth. Woe, woe, woe, a disobedient and gainsaying people ! Woe, woe, woe, a people hating righteousness and loving iniquity ! The Lord shall straightway destroy them from off the face of the earth."

He made an imperative gesture of dismissal, and first one and then another in the crowd turned to

slink home like beaten dogs, snarling, growling, but afraid.

Hilarius and Martin buried the witch at the back of her wretched den; and the Friar, the priest lost in the son, prayed long by the else unhallowed grave, and Martin prayed beside him.

Hilarius stood apart, his lips set straight, and said no prayer; for what availed it to pray for an unassoilzied witch who had met her due, damned alike by God and man?

Martin came up to him.

"She was his mother," he said, as if making excuse.

Hilarius stared in bewilderment. His mother? Ay, but an evil liver; and the people of Bungay had wrought a good work in sending her to her own place. He crossed himself piously at the thought of the near neighbourhood of devils busied with a thrice-damned soul.

Martin led them out of Bungay by the Earsham road, and the Friar clung to him like a little child, for the strength of his vision was spent. They lay that night with a friendly shepherd; but only one slept, and that one Hilarius. He lay on a truss of sweet-smelling hay, and dreamt of Wymondham and Brother Andreas; of gold, vermilion and blue; of wondrous pictures, and a great name: and the scent of the pine forest at home swept across his quiet sleep.

On the morrow came the parting of the ways, for Hilarius was all aglow for Wymondham, and Martin had charged himself with the Friar at least as far as Norwich.

"As well lead a blind friar as sing blindly at another's bidding," he said whimsically, and so they bade one another farewell, never to meet again in this world; for Martin and the Friar went to Yarmouth, not Norwich, and there they perished among the first when the east wind swept the Plague thither in a boat-load of sickened shipmen. And Hilarius—once again the Angel of the Lord stood in the path of his desires.

CHAPTER VII

THE COMING OF HUNGER AND LOVE

Hilarius fared but slowly; it was ill travelling on a high-road in good weather, but on a cross-road in the spring!—that was a time to commend oneself body and soul to the Saints. He walked warily, picking his way in and out of the bog between fence and ditch, which was all that remained to show where the piety of the past once kept a road. The low land to his left was submerged, a desolate tract giving back a sullen grey sky, lifeless, barren, save where a gaunt poplar like the mast of a sunken ship broke the waste of waters.

The sight brought Hilarius' thoughts sharply back to the events of the evening before. Wonderful indeed were the judgments of God! A witch—plainly proved to be such—had been struck dead in the midst of her sins; and London, that light-minded, reprobate city, was a heap of graves. Now he, Hilarius, having seen much evil and the justice of the Almighty, would get him in peace to Wymondham, there to learn to be a cunning limner; and having so learnt would

joyfully hie him back to Prior Stephen and his own monastery.

Presently the way led somewhat uphill, and he saw to his right a small hamlet. It lay some distance off his road, but he was sharp-set, for the shepherd's fare had been meagre; and so turned aside in the hope of an ale-house. There was no side road visible, and he struck across the dank, marshy fields until he lighted on a rude track which led to the group of cottages. The place struck him as strangely quiet; no smoke rose from the chimneys; no dogs rushed out barking furiously at a stranger's advent. The first hovel he passed was empty, the open door showed a fireless hearth. At the second he knocked and heard a sound of scuffling within. As no one answered his repeated summons he pushed the door open; the low room was desolate, but two bright eyes peered at him from a corner,—'twas a rat. Hilarius turned away, sudden fear at his heart, and passed on, finding in each hovel only empty silence.

Apart from the rest, standing alone in a field, was a somewhat larger cottage; a bush swung from the projecting pole above the door: it was the ale-house that he sought; here, at least, he would find some one. As he came up he heard a child crying, and lo! on the doorstep sat a dirty little maid of some four summers, sobbing away for dear life.

Hilarius approached diffidently, and stooped down to wipe away the grimy tears.

The child regarded him, round eyes, open mouth; then, with a shrill cry of joy, she held out her thin arms.

At the sound of her cry the door opened; on the threshold stood a woman still young, but haggard and weary-eyed; at her breast was a little babe. She stared at Hilarius, and then, pulling the child to her in the doorway, waved him away.

"Stand off, fool!—'tis the Plague."

Hilarius shrank back.

"And thy neighbours?" he said.

"Nay, they were light-footed eno' when they saw what was to do, and left us three to die like rats in a hole." Then eagerly: "Hast thou any bread?"

He shook his head.

"Nay, I came here seeking some. Art thou hungry?"

She threw out her hands.

"'Tis two days sin' I had bite or sup."

"Where lies the nearest village? and how far?"

"A matter of an hour, over yonder."

"See, goodwife," said Hilarius, "I will go buy thee food and come again."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"So said another, and he never came back."

"Nay, but perchance some evil befell him," said gentle Hilarius.

"Well, I will trust thee." She went in and returned with a few small coins. "'Tis all I have. Tell no man whence thou art, else they will hunt thee from their doors."

Hilarius nodded, took the money, and ran as fast as he could go in the direction of the village.

The woman watched him.

"Is it fear or love that lends him that pace?" she muttered, as she sat down to wait.

It was love.

Hilarius entered the village discreetly, and, adding the little money he had to the woman's scanty store, bought bread, a flask of wine, flour and beans, and a jug of milk.

"'Tis for a sick child," he said when he asked for it, and the woman pushed back the money, bidding him God-speed.

The return journey was accomplished much more slowly, because of his precious burden; and as he crossed a field, there, dead in a snare, lay a fine coney.

"Now hath Our Lady herself had thought for the poor mother!" cried Hilarius joyously, and added it to his store.

When he reached the cottage, and the woman saw the

food, she broke into loud weeping, for her need had been great; then, as if giving up the struggle to another and a stronger, she sank on the bed with her fast-failing babe in her arms.

Hilarius fed her carefully with bread and wine—not for nothing had he served the Infirmarian when blood-letting had proved too severe for some weak Brother—and then turned his attention to the little maid who sat patient, eyeing the food.

For her, bread and milk. He sat down on a low stool, and taking the child on his knee slowly supplied the gaping, bird-like mouth. At last the little maid heaved a sigh of content, leant her flaxen head against her nurse's shoulder, and fell fast asleep.

Hilarius, cradling her carefully in gentle arms, crooned softly to her, thrilling with tenderness. She was his own, his little sister, the child he had found and saved. Surely Our Lady had guided him to her, and her great Mother-love would shield this little one from a foul and horrid death. In that dirty, neglected room, the child warm against his breast, Hilarius lived the happiest moments of his life.

Presently he rose, for there was much to be done, kissed the little pale cheek, noted fearfully the violet shadows under the closed eyes, and laid his new-found treasure on the bed by her mother.

The woman was half-asleep, but started awake.

"Art thou going?" she said, and despair gazed at him from her eyes.

"Nay, nay, surely not until we all go together," he said soothingly. "I would but kindle a fire, for the cold is bitter."

Wood was plentiful, and soon a bright fire blazed on the hearth. The poor woman, heartened by her meal, rose and came to sit by it, and, stretching out her thin hands to the grateful warmth, told her tale.

"'Twas Gammer Harden's son who first heard tell of a strange new sickness at Caxton's; and then Jocell had speech with a herd from those parts, who was fleeing to a free town, because of some ill he had done. Next day Jocell fell sick with vomitings, and bleeding, and breaking out of boils, and in three days he lay dead; and Gammer Harden fell sick and died likewise. Then one cried 'twas the Plague, and the wrath of God; and they fled—the women to the nuns at Bungay, and the men to seek work or shelter on the Manor; but us they left, for I was with child."

"And thy husband?" said Hilarius.

"Nay, he was not my husband, but these are his children, his and mine. Some hold 'tis a sin to live thus, and perhaps because of it this evil hath fallen upon me."

She looked at the babe lying on her lap, its waxen face drawn and shrunk with the stress of its short life.

Hilarius spoke gently :—

"It is indeed a grievous sin against God and his Church to live together out of holy wedlock, and perchance 'tis true that for this very thing thou hast been afflicted, even as David the great King. But since thou didst sin ignorantly the Lord in His mercy sent me to serve thee in thy sore need; ay, and in very truth Our Lady herself showed me where the coney lay snared. Let us pray God by His dear Mother to forgive us our sins and to have mercy on these little ones."

And kneeling there in the firelight he besought the great Father for his new-found family.

Five days passed, and despite extreme care victuals were short. Hilarius dug up roots from the hedgerows, and went hungry, but at last the pinch came; the woman was too weak and ill to walk, the babe scarce in life—there could be no thought of flight—and the little maid grew white, and wan and silent. Then it came to Hilarius that he would once again beg food in the village where he had sought help before.

He went slowly, for he had eaten little that his maid might be the better fed, and he was very sad. When he reached the village he found his errand like to be vain. News of the Plague was coming from many parts, and

each man feared for his own skin. At every house they questioned him: "Art thou from a hamlet where the Plague hath been?" and when he answered "Yea," the door was shut.

Very soon men, angry and afraid, came to drive him from the place. He gained the village cross, and prayed them for love of the Saviour and His holy Rood to give him bread for his little maid and her mother. Let them set it in the street, he would take it and cross no man's threshold. Surely they could not, for shame, let a little child die of want?

"Nay, 'tis better they die, so are we safe," cried a voice; then they fell upon him and beat him, and drove him from the village with blows and curses.

Bruised and panting, he ran from them, and at last the chase ceased; breathless and exhausted he flung himself under a hedge.

A hawk swooped, struck near him, and rose again with its prey. Hilarius shuddered; but perhaps the hawk had nestlings waiting open-mouthed for food? His little maid! His eyes filled with tears as he thought of those who awaited him. He picked up a stone, and watched if perchance a coney might show itself. He had never killed, but were not his nestlings agape?

Nothing stirred, but along the road came a waggon of strange shape and gaily painted. He rose to his feet,

praying the great Mother to send him help in his awful need.

The waggon drew near; the driver sat asleep upon the shaft, the horse took his own pace. It passed him before he could pluck up heart to ask an alms, and from the back dangled a small sack and a hen. If he begged and was refused his little maid must die. A minute later the sack and the hen had changed owners—but not unobserved; a clear voice called a halt; the waggon stood fast; two figures sprang out, a girl and a boy: and Hilarius stood before them on the white highway—a thief.

"Seize the knave!" cried the girl sharply.

Hilarius stared at her and she at him. It was his dancer, and she knew him, ay, despite the change of dress and scene, she knew him.

"What! The worthy novice turned worldling and thief! Nay, 'tis a rare jest. What of thy fine sermons now, good preacher?"

But Hilarius answered never a word; overcome by shame, grief, and hunger, sudden darkness fell upon him.

When he came to himself he was sitting propped against the hedge; the waggon was drawn up by the roadside, and the dancer and her brother stood watching him.

"Fetch bread and wine," said the girl, and to Hilarius, who tried to speak, "Peace, 'til thou hast eaten."

Hilarius ate eagerly, and when he had made an end the dancer said :—

"Now tell thy tale. Prithee, since when didst thou leave thy Saints and thy nursery for such an ill trade as this ?"

Hilarius told her all, and when he had finished he wept because of his little maid, and his were not the only tears.

The dancer went to the waggon and came back with much food taken from her store, to which she added the hen ; the sack held but fodder.

"But Gia," grumbled her brother, "there will be naught for us to-night."

"Thou canst eat bread, or else go hungry," she retorted, and filled a small sack with the victuals.

Hilarius watched her, hardly daring to hope. She held it out to him : "Now up and off to thy little maid."

Hilarius took the sack, but only to lay it down again, Kneeling, he took both her little brown hands, and his tears fell fast as he kissed them.

"Maid, maid, canst forgive my theft, ay, and my hard words in the forest ? God help me for a poor, blind fool !"

"Nay," she answered, "there is naught to forgive ;

and see, thou hast learnt to hunger and to love! Farewell, little brother, we pass here again a fortnight hence, and I would fain have word of thy little maid. Ay, and shouldst thou need a home for her, bring her to us; my old grandam is in the other waggon and she will care for her."

Hilarius ran across the fields, full of sorrow for his sin and yet glad because of the wonderful goodness of God.

When he got back his little maid sat alone by the fire. He hastened to make food ready, but the child was far spent and would scarcely eat. Then he went out to find the woman.

He saw her standing in the doorway of an empty hovel, and she cried to him to keep back.

"My babe is dead, and I feel the sickness on me. I went to the houses seeking meat, even to Gammer Harden's; and I must die. As for thee, thou shalt not come near me, but bide with the child; so maybe God will spare the innocent."

Hilarius besought her long that she would at least suffer him to bring her food, but she would not.

"Nay, I could not eat, the fever burns in my bones; let me alone that I may die the sooner."

Hilarius went back with a heavy heart, and lay that night with the little maid in his arms on the settle by

'Kneeling, he took both her little brown hands, and his tears fell fast as he kissed them'

(*Page* 91)

'Kneeling, he took both her little brown hands, and
His tears fell fast as he kissed them.'

(Page 91)

the hearth. Despite his fear he slept heavily and late: when he rose the sun was high and the child awake.

He fed her, and, bidding her bide within went out to gain tidings of the poor mother. He called, but no one answered; and the door of the hovel in which she had taken shelter stood wide. Then, as he searched the fields, fearing the fever had driven her abroad, he saw the flutter of garments in a ditch: and lo! there lay the woman, dead with her dead babe on her breast. She had lain down to die alone with God in the silence, that haply the living might escape; and on her face was peace.

Later, Hilarius laid green boughs tenderly over mother and babe, and covered them with earth, saying many prayers. Then he went back to his fatherless, motherless maid.

She ailed nought that he could see, and there was food and to spare; but each day saw her paler and thinner, until at last she could not even sit, but lay white and silent in Hilarius' tender arms; and he fought with death for his little maid.

Then on a day she would take no food, and when Hilarius put tiny morsels in her mouth she could not swallow; and so he sat through the long hours, his little maid in his arms, with no thought beside. The darkness came, and he waited, wide-eyed, praying for the dawn.

When the new day broke and the east was pale with light he carried the child out that he might see her, for a dreadful fear possessed him. And it came to pass that when the light kissed her little white face she opened her eyes and smiled at Hilarius, and, so smiling, died.

The dancer, true to her promise, scanned the road as the waggon drew near the place of Hilarius' first and last theft: he was standing by the wayside alone. The waggon passed on carrying him with it; and the dancer looked but once on his face and asked no question.

PART III

THE FRUIT

CHAPTER I

HOW LONG, O LORD, HOW LONG!

THE Monastery by the forest pursued an even existence, with no great event to trouble its serenity, for it lay too far west for the Plague to be more than a terrible name.

True, there had been dissension when Prior Stephen, summoned to Cluny by the Abbat, had perforce left the dominion to the Sub-Prior. For lo! the Sub-Prior, a mild and most amiable man in his own estate, had proved harsh and overbearing in government. Ay, and in an irate mood he had fallen upon Brother William, the Sacrist, in the Frater, plucked out his hair and beaten him sore; whereat the Convent was no little scandalised, and counselled Brother William to resign his office. He flouted the Chamberlain also, and Brother Roger the Hospitaller, and so affronted the Brethren that when he began to sing the *Verba mea* on leaving the chapter, the Convent—yea, even the novices—were silent, to show their displeasure.

When Prior Stephen returned he was exceeding wroth,

but said little; only he took from the Sub-Prior his office, and all that appertained thereto, and made him as one of the other monks; and Brother William, who was a gentle and devout servant of God, he made Sub-Prior in his stead; and the Convent was at peace.

Brother Ambrose, he to whom the vision was vouchsafed, had slipped through the grey veil which once hid Jerusalem from his longing gaze; Brother Richard was now in the land where the blind receive their sight; and Brother Thomas the Cellarer—but of him let us say little and think with charity; for 'tis to be feared that he greatly abused his office and is come to judgment.

Two of the older monks, Brother Anselm and Brother Paul, who had spent fifty years in the sheltered peace of the Monastery walls, sat warming their tired old limbs in the south cloister, for the summer sunshine was very pleasant to them.

"Since Brother Thomas died—" began Brother Paul.

"The Lord have mercy on his soul!" ejaculated Brother Anselm.

"Since Brother Thomas died," said Brother Paul again—a little impatiently, though he crossed himself piously enough—"methinks the provisions have oft been scanty and far from tempting, Brother."

"Ay, and the wine," said Brother Anselm. "Me-

thinks our Cellarer draws the half of it from the Convent's well."

They shook their heads sadly.

"No doubt," said Brother Anselm after a short silence, "our Cellarer is most worthy, strict, and honest in the performance of his office—while Brother Thomas, alack——"

"Methinks Brother Edmund is somewhat remiss also in his duties," said Brother Paul. "The Prior, holy man, perceives nothing of these things. On Sunday's feast one served him with a most unsavoury mess in the refectory, the dish thereof being black and broken; yet he ate the meat in great content, and seemingly with appetite."

"He is but young, he is but young—sixty come Michaelmas—sixty, and twenty-two years Prior—'tis a long term"; and Brother Anselm nodded his head.

"Ay, he is still young, and of sound teeth," said Brother Paul, "whereas thou and I, Brother, are as babes needing pap-meat. Brother Thomas—God rest his soul!—was wont to give savoury mess easy of eating to the elder Brethren."

"Ay, he was a kind man with all his fault," said Brother Anselm, fingering his toothless gums. "Think you 'twould be well to speak of this matter to the Prior?"

"Nay, nay," said the other, "he is ever against any store being set on the things of this world—'tis well for the greater discipline of the flesh,' so saith he ever. Still he hath forbidden the blood-letting to us elder Brethren."

"Methinks there is little to let, since Brother Thomas died," said Brother Anselm ruefully.

"Nay, then, let us seek out the Cellarer and admonish him—maybe he will hear a word in season," and the two old monks moved slowly away to the Cellarer's office as Prior Stephen came down the cloister walk.

He looked little older, his carriage was upright as ever, but government sat heavy upon him; the keen, ascetic face was weary, and the line of the lips showed care. His thoughts were busy with Hilarius. It was now full six years that the lad had left the Monastery, and since the Christmas after his going no news had come of him, save that he never reached St Alban's. Had the Plague gathered him as it gathered many another well-beloved son? Or had the awakening proved too sudden for the lad set blind-eyed without the gate?

He passed from the cloister into the garth where bloomed the lilies that Hilarius had loved so well. He looked at the row of nameless graves with the great Rood for their common memorial; last but one lay the resting-place of Brother Richard, and the blind monk's

dying speech had been of the lad whose face he had strained his eyes to see.

Prior Stephen stood by the farmery door, and the scent of Mary's flowers came to him as it had come to Hilarius at the gate. He stretched out his hands with the strange pathetic gesture of a strong man helpless. It was all passing fair; the fields of pale young corn trembling in the gentle breeze; the orchards and vineyards with fast maturing fruit; the meadows where the sleek kine browsed languidly in the warm summer sunshine. Peace and prosperity everywhere; the old Church springing into new beauty as the spire rose slowly skywards; peace and prosperity, new glories for the House of the Lord; and yet, and yet, his heart ached for his own helplessness, and for the exceeding longing that he had for the boy whose mother once held that heart in the hollow of her little hand.

Ah well, blessed be God who had called him from the things of this world to the service of Christ and the Church! Once again he offered himself in the flame of his desires: he would fast and pray and wait.

The Office bell sounded sharp and clear across the still summer air calling to Vespers, and the Prior hastened to his place.

"*Qui seminant in lachrymis in exultatione metent,*"

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chanted the deep voices of the monks, and Prior Stephen's voice trembled as he joined in the Psalmody.

"*Euntes ibant et flebant mittentes semina sua. Venientes autem venient cum exultatione portantes manipulos suos.*"

He had sown in tears, ay, and was weary of the sowing; but the harvesting was not yet.

CHAPTER II

MARY'S LILIES

It came to pass upon a certain day scarce a se'nnight later, that Prior Stephen was troubled in his mind by reason of a dream which came to him.

It happened on this wise. He was sitting by his window after the noon repast, musing, as he was wont, on his dear son. The song of the bees busy in the herb-garden was very pleasant to his ear, the warm, still air overcame him, and he slept. Suddenly he heard a voice calling—a voice he knew in every fibre of his being and yet could set no name to, for it was the voice of God. He arose in haste and went out into the garth, and lo! under the lilies Hilarius lay sleeping. The Prior stood fast in great wonder, his heart leaping for joy; yet he could not cross the little piece of grass that lay between the cloister and the farmery door.

As he watched, a woman, light of foot and of great beauty, came swiftly from the gate to where Hilarius slept; and the Prior was grieved, and marvelled that the porter had opened to such an one; for it was a grave

scandal that a woman should set foot within the Monastery precincts. He strove to cry, but his voice died on his lips, and his feet were as lead.

The woman stayed when she came to the sleeping lad, and stooped to arouse him, but he slept on. She called him, and her voice was as the calling of the summer sea on a shelving beach; but Hilarius gave no heed. Then, in great impatience, she caught at the white lilies under which he lay; and, as she broke the flower-crowned stems, Hilarius stirred and cried out in his sleep, whereat she plucked the faster. Of a sudden Prior Stephen was as one set free. He strode to the woman's side: there was but one lily left. He laid his hand on her shoulder, for speech was still far from him: and she fell back from the one remaining blossom with a cry of fear—and Prior Stephen awoke, for behold, it was a dream; but he was sore troubled.

"Maybe," said he, "evil threatens the lad, such evil as slew his mother, on whom God have mercy!" And sighing heavily he took his way to the great Rood and made supplication for his son.

Far away, under a southern sky, in one of the great palaces of Florence, there stood a woman of fair stature, with tight-clenched hands, whose many jewels bit the

tender flesh. Her russet eyes flashed under threatening brows, her teeth held fast the curling upper lip. Great, alack! was her fame: men crept to her knee like spaniels craving favour. Great was her wealth: a golden piece for every ruddy strand that hung a shimmering mantle to her knee. Her beauty—nay, men had slain themselves gladly to escape the torment of her look. She stood in the curtained doorway, a heavy purple hanging at her back; and the man who awaited her paled as he saw her vengeful face.

It was Hilarius. He drew himself up to the full of his slender height, and bowed.

Panting a little, the woman came towards him across the many-hued marble floors; and, as she passed, a vase of great white lilies caught in her draperies of cramoisie and fell. She gave no heed, but swept on, and faced him in the sunny silence. Across the pause the Angelus sounded from a church hard by: Hilarius crossed himself devoutly; and the stillness fled before a woman's scornful laugh.

"Nay, then, Signor," she cried mockingly, "is ours to be a war of signs and silence? I have heard thy lips were ready enough with judgment, though they halt at a love-phrase. By Our Lady, if all that is said of thee be true, I will e'en have thee whipped at the gibbet for thy gibes! Speak, fool, while thy tongue is left thee;

'tis a last asking. Wilt thou paint this face of mine that is, it seems, so little to thy liking? Strain not my patience over much—'tis a slender cord at best, and somewhat tried already. Speak, is it yea or nay?"

Hilarius looked away to where Mary's flowers lay bruised and scattered on the flag of blood-red marble; his answer came low and clear:—

"'It is nay.'"

She thrust her head forward, and looked at him wondering; there was a stain where her teeth had been busy.

"'It is nay,'" she repeated after him, and her eyes mocked him. "May a poor Princess ask the Signor's reason?"

Hilarius pointed past her to the fallen lilies.

"It lies there."

For an instant the hot colour splashed the angry whiteness of her cheek; then, pale to the lips, she turned on him; and she stammered in her wrath:—

"And dost thou—dost thou dare, say this to my face—to me, who stooped to ask when I had but to command? I, with my unmatched beauty; I, who hold the hearts of men in thrall to the lifting of my eyes; I, to whom men kneel as to their God! Art thou mad, mad, that thou canst set aside such a behest as mine? 'Tis small wonder men say thy doublet hides

a monkish dress; of a truth the tale they brought savoured of little else. Hear me, thou prating, milk-faced Modesty, I choose that thou shalt limn this face of mine: say me nay, and I will teach thee a lesson hard of forgetting; for I will silence thy preaching for aye, and lend my serving-men to whip thee through the streets. Men, said I? Nay, thou art too much a cur to make fit sport for men: rather my maids shall wield the rod and lace thy shoulders."

She flung herself on a low couch by the open window, where the peacocks on the terrace strutted in the sun; and Hilarius waited, dumb as the dog to which she had likened him, for he had no word.

There was silence a while.

Then the Princess spoke, and her voice cut Hilarius like the sting of a lash:—

"Bring me yon flowers."

He obeyed.

"Set them at my feet."

He bent his knee and did so, wondering.

A moment, and she trod them under; their dying fragrance filled the air, as their living breath had flooded the senses of the blind-eyed lad at the Monastery gate.

One by one she set her heel upon the blossoms, and the marble was yellow with stolen gold.

Hilarius held his breath; it was as if she did to death

some living thing, and yet he dared not bid her stay her insolent feet.

It was done ; and she looked at him under questioning brows.

" So much for thy lilies ! Dost still think that it will soil thy brush to limn such an one as I ? I, whom men call the Queen of Love—but thy lips, say they, burnt with another name ! Bethink thee, faint heart, there is not a man in all this city but would count death a small price to pay for my favours ; and I ask of thee one little service, and thou shalt name thine own reward. Surely 'tis churlish to gainsay ! "

Her voice was suddenly sweet.

Stooping, she gathered to her the destruction she had wrought, fingering the fallen petals tenderly, with a little sigh. She glanced up at Hilarius through her lashes' net. " Maybe I was over hasty," she said softly, and a sob swelled the round of her wonderful throat—" and yet how couldst thou call me wanton ? " Her mouth drooped a little—she was very fair.

" Art thou still minded to set these poor pale flowers against the roses in love's garden ? For I love thee," she added, and then suddenly she was still.

Hilarius looked from the dead flowers to the woman in her over-mastering beauty, and all at once the passion that lies hid in the heart of every man leapt to his lips.

'Her voice was suddenly sweet'

'Her voice was suddenly sweet'

He desired this woman as he had never before desired aught in all the world, and he knew, to his shame, that she was his for the asking. The blood thudded and rang in his veins ; he feasted his eyes on the curve of her neck and the radiance of her sun-swept hair. He stretched out his hands, but ere he could speak she raised a white, terrified face, and glanced over her shoulder.

" Who touched me ? " she gasped, her voice shrill with fear, " who touched me ? " And she sprang to her feet.

There was no one : the two shared a common pallor as they stared into each others' eyes across the dying lilies. Hilarius shrank back and covered his face with his hands. Clear and distinct he heard the Prior's voice : " *A light woman—a light woman.*"

Then the Princess said hoarsely, " Go, go " ; and without word or look Hilarius went.

The Prior rose from his knees comforted. He had wrestled with the devil for his son's soul, and knew that he had prevailed.

CHAPTER III

OPEN EYES AT THE GATE

ANOTHER year wrote its record on forest and field. The weeks passed; summer sped to autumn, the ripe corn bowed to the sickle. The Convent's lands were rich and heavy, virgin soil reclaimed; and the Prior, watching the last great wain piled high with wealth of golden treasure, saw the porter coming to him.

Now the porter was stout, short of breath, and of a hasty spirit; and the Prior knew something was amiss by reason of his hurried gait and wrathful countenance.

"Domine," he gasped, "Domine, there is a ragged man at the gate, a vagabond by his own showing, and he craves speech of thee. I bade him go to the guest-house, but he will not budge, and hath waited already an hour despite my——"

The porter stayed, staring; he spoke to the wind; the Prior was already half-way to the gate.

"This my son was dead and is alive again," sang his heart. The porter, afraid, hasted after him with the keys, and had scarce time to do his office ere the sun-

burnt vagabond was clasped in the Prior's arms. It was a harvesting indeed.

That night Hilarius went across to the Prior's house to tell the tale of his journeyings. He found him seated in a great oak chair by the open window; the sky was ablaze with stars, and the flame of the oil lamp jarred like a splash of yellow paint on the moonlight which flooded the room; the Prior's eyes smiled measureless content, and the murmured "*Laus Deo*" of his lips voiced the gladness of his heart. Thus, in the shelter of peace and a great love, Hilarius told his tale, while the forest waved a welcome to him over the Monastery wall, and the late lilies burned white in the garth below.

The Prior sat with his chin in his hand, his eyes fixed on the lad's face, pale against the dark wainscot; and Hilarius told of his journeyings, and all that befell, even as it hath been recorded in this chronicle; and the Prior's eyes were wet as he heard of the little maid.

"And then, my son?" said the Prior.

"Then, my Father, I companied with the caravan folk as far as the sea-coast; and, leaving them there, went overseas in the train of my lord Bishop Robert Walter of Norwich, who was hasting to Rome. He knew thee, my Father, and bade his people supply my needs."

"Ay, he knows me," said the Prior briefly. "The

Lord reward him according to his works, but show him mercy forasmuch as he had compassion on my son ! "

" Then saw I Rome, my Father, that great and beauteous city full of treasure and many wonders ; only the Holy Father I did not see, being let. Methinks life in that country is as one long pageant ; but I marked that great holiness and an evil life, much riches and much penury, dwelt there side by side, and men recked little of death but much of pleasure. Then one bade me go to Florence an I would be a limner ; therefore I hasted thither, and gave my last coin for bread as I entered the city."

The Prior's brows contracted ; the lad had seen some schooling.

" But thou didst learn to be a limner, my son ? "

" Ay, my Father, in God's time : at first I must herd goats and sell melons in the market-place for a lump of bread. Day by day I strove to gain enough to buy colours, but could not, for the Lord sent me ever a neighbour poorer than myself. Nevertheless I was of good courage, knowing the Lord's ways are not as ours ; and mindful how Brother Ambrose held that inasmuch as the Heavenly City is laid with fair colours 'twere no sin to deem that a man may limn perfect pictures there, for the gift is from the Lord."

" My son, 'tis a great lesson thou hast learnt," said

the Prior, "for the Word was made Flesh; and as Blessed John hath it, a man cannot love God unseen, if he love not the brother whom He hath given him. What next, dear lad?"

"My Father, the Lord Himself sent a messenger to me. One day a great limner, the Signor Andrea di Cione, whom men call d'Orcagna, stayed by me where I stood with my melons in the shadow of the Shepherd's Tower, and bade me follow him to his house, for he would fain use me for an angel's head in the great Altar-piece he was e'en then concerned with for the Church of the White Friars. Later he heard my story; and when he found I had some small skill with the brush he kept me with him, and taught me as only such an one can teach: him I served five years. And many times Satan desired my soul; nay, once I was in peril of hell-fire, but the Lord was with me and plucked my feet out of the pit. But of that I will speak anon, at my shriving, as is meet."

The Prior remembered his dream, but he said no word and Hilarius took up his tale.

"Then one day my master cried there was an end to teaching; nevertheless he would have me bide with him in honour for the work. But my heart was full of longing for home and the scent of the forest; and, above all, for thee, my Father; therefore I set my face north,

that I might bring back my gift to St Benedict and our Church; and should have been here long ere this, but I was let by the way."

The Prior looked up a little anxiously, and Hilarius smiled at the question in his face.

"'Tis a lawless tract, my Father, under the shadow of the great mountains beyond Florence; and I was taken by robbers, who bore me and others of our company to their fastness in the hills: there I lay in a little cave many days; but what befell the rest I know not. The robbers brought me forth to serve them, and by God's mercy handled me kindly, though they thought little of blood-shedding.

"Then one of them was troubled in his spirit, and minded to forsake this evil manner of life. Therefore one night he fled, carrying me with him, when the others had gone forth; and we made good our way to Mantua. There Pietro, for so was the robber called, left me that he might give himself to the service of God and men, inasmuch as he had formerly abused them. Never saw I man so changed, my Father; his speech, formerly profane, was all of God and the Saints; he did penance and confessed his sins publicly; ay, by the Justice's orders he received one hundred lashes in the market-place, and at every lash he cried with upturned face, '*Deo Gratias*!' And I was there, because he besought

of me to stand in the crowd and pray for him that his courage failed not. But it came to pass that the people marvelled at his joyful endurance; and indeed 'twas more like a scourging of one of the blessed martyrs than of a poor sinful robber. After this the Brothers of the Poor took him, for such was his desire; and so I bade him farewell, and craved his blessing."

"The Lord fulfil all his mind!" said the Prior with clasped hands.

"Amen," said Hilarius.

"Didst thou not fear to journey further alone, my son?"

"Nay, my Father, I found for the most part good and kindly men by the way, despite their somewhat evil seeming; but at Genoa I took service with a merchant then beginning his journey, and travelled with him through Flanders, a strange, flat country with many canals and tall poplar trees; and so we came to Bruges in safety, after a most prosperous course. There he commended me to a good friend of his, a wool merchant travelling to Salisbury; and at first all things went well with us; but later the winds proved contrary, and we were driven hither and thither in great peril of our lives, but at last made the Bristol Channel, and so came safe into port. Thence I have come hither afoot begging my bread."

When Hilarius had made an end, the Prior took him in his arms and blessed him for his dear son; praising God that the lad had come back a child at heart, but hungering, loving, open-eyed.

Next morning, being shriven, Hilarius ate the bread and drank the wine of the "wayfaring man," his heart merry for the joy of his home-coming. When the Lady-Mass was ended he knelt on in her Chapel.

"Great Light of Love, all praise and thanks be thine from thy poor son," sang his heart; and then he prayed for his little maid.

CHAPTER IV

THE PASSING OF PRIOR STEPHEN

The convent welcomed Hilarius gladly, and on the Feast of St Michael he made his profession, for the Prior deemed that he had served his noviciate and been found faithful; and the Brethern assented eagerly, for they were fain to keep this wondrous limner for the service of their own Church.

Then, by the Prior's command, Hilarius set himself to limn a great picture for the High Altar. It was a Crucifixion, and all his heart and all his love were in it. When the Brethren first saw the fair proportion and fine colours that Hilarius brought to the work, they rejoiced in that their Church should be glorified above other Churches of the Order; but when the picture was near completing, and they gazed up into the wondrous face of the Great King who looked down from the throne of His triumphant suffering, with a world of hunger and love in His eyes for those who had so enthroned Him, they hung their heads for shame because of the emulation in their hearts; and lo! the Cellarer, for very love, was

careful for the needs of the elder Brethren; and the monks, for very love, laid hold gladly of suffering, and so the Convent was blessed, and lived together in unity.

In one of the groups very near the Cross, Hilarius set a grey-eyed girl, a woman with a babe at the breast, and, clinging to her skirts, a little flaxen-headed maid. None but the Prior knew the meaning of these three, and their names, with that of a poor light-o'-love, were ever on his lips when he offered the Holy Sacrifice.

Gentle Brother Hilarius painted and loved, and was beloved of all his world. The years sped, and he became in turn Almoner, Novice-master, and Sub-Prior: and no man envied him, for he reckoned himself ever as least of all and servant of all.

Prior Stephen attained his fourscore years, ruling the Convent wisely and well to the very end; ay, and never ailed aught, his call coming as it might be straight from the mouth of the Lord.

On the Feast of Blessed Stephen he went into the chapter and said as always: "*The souls of the deceased brethren and believers rest in peace!*" to which the Convent replied, "*Amen.*" Then with his hands raised to bless he cried, "*Benedicite,*" and again with loud and joyful voice "*Domine,*" and again "*Domine!*" as of one who answers to his name—and so passed to his place in the Kingdom of Christ.

The Convent elected Hilarius to be Prior in his stead, which election the Abbat of Cluny confirmed with good grace.

Time passed, and the fame of the Monastery grew because of the exceeding beauty of the Church, for Hilarius, with those whom he taught, set fair pictures on the walls, and blazoned the roof with the blue of heaven and gold of the wakeful stars. In the span over the High Altar he set Blessed Benedict himself with the face of Prior Stephen, and round him the angel virtues; even as one Giotto, a shepherd lad, had limned them in the Church of the Little Brothers.

Now Prior Hilarius desired greatly to set a picture of Our Lady above the Altar in her Chapel. Long did he pray with ever increasing fervour and much fasting that this boon might be vouchsafed him for her glory and the Convent's greater good. And one day—'twas her Nativity—he set his hand to the work, for it seemed to him that she would have it so; and he was greatly humbled that such heavenly kindness should attend so vile a sinner. Day by day he set apart some hours for this service; and he limned a face so fair and radiant, with woman's love and light of heaven, that it was whispered in the cloister walks that the Prior had surely been blessed by a vision, else had he never pictured the Maid-Mother in so wondrous a fashion: and of a truth

a man might well give credence to such a story, for the joy that shone in the Prior's eyes and might not be hid.

Many other tales did the Brethren tell of Hilarius, but softly, for he would hear no word of his own deeds or the favours vouchsafed him.

When he walked in the garth the pigeons circled round him crooning their peace-note ; and it was told that the kine in the meadows ceased browsing when he passed, and needs must company with him a little way.

Once it befell that a lay-brother was afflicted with heavy sickness by reason of the sun's great heat ; and Satan strove with him for his undoing, so that the poor soul foamed at the mouth and roared out blasphemy ; yea, verily, and must be held with cords also, lest he do himself or his fellows some grievous hurt. But when the Prior laid his hand between the man's troubled eyes sweet sleep came upon him, and his madness forsook him.

The poor also crowded to the Monastery gate and were fed, ay, even if the Brethren went hungry ; and if any man in all the villages round had aught against his neighbour he would come to the Prior for a just hearing.

Nevertheless, despite these things the Convent's peace began to be troubled. Men sought the Monastery for its famous name, caring but little for religion ; there

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and were fed, ay, even if the Brethren
went hungry'

'The poor also crowded to the Monastery gate
and were fed, as even if the Brethren
were hungry.'

were many young novices within its walls, and the strong hand of Prior Stephen was lacking. Hilarius was of gentler build; he would speak ever in love, thinking no evil, whereas it is not given to all men to understand that tongue. So it came to pass that the younger Brethren waxed fat and kicked, and the elder Brethren murmured.

CHAPTER V

"GABRIEL, MAKE THIS MAN TO UNDERSTAND THE VISION."—DAN. viii. 16

ONE day the Novice-master, Brother Adam, a most worthy man, came in sore trouble to the Prior and would resign his office.

"Surely never before did such an ill-conditioned brood find shelter in a monastery!" he cried. "They grow fat, idle, insolent, quarrelsome—never at peace among themselves; never a Pater or an Ave too many, or a task fulfilled, save for fear of stripes. I would that the time of blood-letting were here that their high stomachs might be brought low. I am no longer young, my Father, and this burden tries me sorely. Prithee, let it be shifted to another and a stronger back."

The Prior listened with many an inward *mea culpa*. "'Tis a sad hearing, Brother Adam, but young blood is hard of mastering; maybe this ill mood will pass. The lad Robert is surely ever gentle and decorous? He hath a most beauteous voice."

The Novice-master threw up his hands.

"Nay, Father, nay, he hath indeed the voice of an angel, but methinks his body is surely the habitation of Satan. He will sing an it please him—or when thou art by, my Father,—but, an it please him not, he is silent; ay, even under grievous stripes. The Precentor giveth him as negligent and ill-conditioned; and in choir, when he looketh most like to one of God's Saints, he is but plotting mischief for the day."

The Prior heard him sadly.

"And Hubert?" he said. "Hubert, methinks, hath a great love of colour and a fine hand with the brush.

Brother Adam was almost speechless.

"Hubert! Nay, Father, forgive me, Father, but even this very Hubert but yesterday slipped a handful of pebbles into Brother Edmund's mess, whereby he was like to break his teeth or take some more grievous hurt. And indeed the peace of the Brethren is much troubled, wherefore they complain bitterly."

"Young blood, young blood, but not of necessity evil," said the Prior. Then, seeing the Novice-master's aggrieved face, he bade him have patience yet a little, for he himself would speak to the novices; and with this Brother Adam must fain be content.

The next day in the Chapter the Prior spoke.

It comes to pass oftentimes that men seeing a sign

are made curious by it ; and then forgetting, find the clue thereto, it may be, long after. Even thus it happened on this day in the Chapter ; and when Prior Hilarius was gathered to his rest the Brethren remembered how they had marked and marvelled at the strange beauty of his face, the beauty as of one who sees the face of the Lord.

" My children," he said—" for my children ye are, though I see among you many it were more fitting I should hail as father, but that the ruling of the Lord cannot be gainsaid—my children, I am minded to think that I have this day a message on my lips that is not mine own.

" Last night a vision came to me as I slept. Blessed Benedict, our Father, stood at my side, and his face was troubled.

" ' Arise, my son,' he cried, ' arise, for the Lord is at hand and hath need of thee.'

" And I, deeming it was of judgment that he spake, sprang up in shame and fear that the Master should find me sleeping.

" Then cried Blessed Benedict again :—

" ' If thou wilt serve the Lord, make haste, for He hath called thee these many times,' and so saying passed from my sight.

" Brethren, I went forth as one bewildered, and made haste to the Church lest peradventure I should find Him ;

but the lamps burnt dim and all was silent. Then I turned aside and went out into the night, and it was very dark, with no sound but the wind in the forest trees.

" My heart was a-hungered, and I sought in cloister and garth ; and as I hasted to the gate I cried aloud, even as she cried who sought Him in a garden—' They have taken away my Lord.'

" At the gate I stayed me, and besought the Lord for a sign ; and lo, in the darkness one came and led me by the hand away from the gate, across the garth and up the dormitory stair, nor loosed me until I passed within where the Brethren lay sleeping, and the chamber was bright with exceeding radiance.

" I found myself by the pallet of my dear son Robert : his face was wet with tears ; and as he lay I saw upon his shoulder the mark of many stripes.

" Again, one took my hand and led me from one to another of our Brethren, and on every face lay the shadow of a great need, but in every face there was somewhat of the Christ ; and the lesson burnt in my heart.

" Then One came swiftly and laid healing hands on the boy Robert ; but I fled, for I might not see Him ; and I awoke sore troubled—ay, and the trouble is on me still.

"My Brethren, I can but tell the vision as it came to me. Great is the rule of Benedict, our Father, and in it stripes, grievous and many as our sins, have their rightful place; but mayhap we forget that love, and love alone, should strike. Ay, and I mind me how Prior Stephen, my Father, said that to be monk a man must learn before all things to hunger and to love. Love should draw the water and build the fire, till the field and attend the sanctuary; and hunger we should cherish in our hearts, hunger for righteousness and for the souls of our brethren, for this is the hunger of God.

"Men come over lightly to the Lord's work; and lo! pride and emulation, jealousy and discontent, spring up and thrive, and the end is shame and confusion.

"I speak as to my children; it is in my heart that the Lord is at hand: let us see that we love while there is yet time."

Then he turned to the novices and stretched out his hands to where they stood amazed, and it may be ashamed—not after this manner was Brother Adam wont to rebuke them.

"And ye, who are, as it were, the babes of our Order, give heed to your ways, neither bring unwilling hands to this service. Better far go forth, yea, even to death, than mock the Lord with froward feet and a heart that is full of vanity. Remember the sacrifice which Cain

offered and the Lord rejected, for he gainsayed the voice of the Lord and disobeyed His Commandment; wherefore the wrath of God fell upon him.

"I, who speak now, speak in love; give ear to my words, and let fear befriend you; for the coming of the Lord is as a thief in the night, and lo! stripes bitter and many await that servant whom the Master finds sleeping."

Then the Prior, having made an end of speaking, raised his hands to bless, and went forth in silence; and no man stirred in his place, for they knew that the Lord had spoken and were afraid.

CHAPTER VI

THE HUNGER OF DICKON THE WOODMAN

JUNE was at an end, and men cried aloud for rain. The hedges were white, the fields scorched and brown; the leaves fell from the trees as at autumn's touch; the fruits scarce formed hung wry and twisted on the bough; the heavens burnt pitiless, without a cloud.

Dickon, the woodman, sat by the wayside gnawing a crust and a scrap of mouldy bacon. There was no sound but the howl of a dog from some neighbouring farmstead, and he sat in sullen mood, his billhook beside him, brooding over his wrongs; for the world had gone contrary with him.

His wife was dead; she had died in childbed a month gone, leaving six hungry naked brats on his shoulders; and now a worse thing had befallen him; his gold was gone—his gold to which he had no right, for 'twas blood-money, the food of his children, ay, and something beside; but Dickon loved the gold piece above all the world—above Heaven and his own soul—and it was gone.

A neighbour had surely done it; marked the hiding-place which he had deemed so safe, and made off with the prize; and i' faith 'twas easy carrying. There was but one piece, and Dickon minded how he had changed his petty hoard to gold scarce a month back at the fair. Maybe it was Thomas the charcoal burner had served him this ill turn; or William Crookleg the miller's man; he was a sly, prying fellow, and there had been ill blood between them.

He was fain to seek the Monastery that lay the other side the forest, and crave justice of the Prior, but that the Prior might say 'twas ill-got gain and well rid of.

Dickon rose to his feet and scrambled homewards; he was ragged, ill-fed, unkempt. The day's work was done, and on the village green he found men and women, for the most part as ill-clad as himself, standing about in groups gossiping. The innkeeper lounged at the ale-house door, thin and peaked as his fellows; there was no good living for any man in those parts, by reason of the over-lord who sore oppressed them.

A little man, keen-eyed and restless, holding a lean and sorry horse by the bridle, was talking eagerly.

"Nay, 'tis true eno', and three crows saw I this very day on the churchyard wall—it bodes ill to some of us."

"Well, well," said the innkeeper, "have it thine own

way. Methinks the ill hath outrun the omen, for there will be naught for man or beast shortly—but fine pickings for thy three crows."

The little man scowled at him : Dickon came up.

"What's to do ? " he said curtly.

"Nay," said mine host, "Robin will have it that some further evil is upon us—tho' methinks we have got our fill and to spare with this drought—ay, and 'twas at thy house, Dickon, he saw the corpse-light."

"Better a corpse-light than six open mouths, and naught to fill them," said Dickon surlily. "Whither away, Robin ? 'Tis not far this beast will travel."

"Right thou art, but my master will turn an honest penny with the carcass," answered the little man ; "give me my reckoning, friend John. I must needs haste if I would see the Forester's ere nightfall."

He pulled out a few small coins and a gold piece. When Dickon saw it his eyes gleamed. Robin paid the reckoning and put the piece in his cheek.

"Hard-earned money—'tis blood out of a stone to draw wages from my master. Better it should light in my belly than in a rogue's pocket. 'Tis as well for me that John o' th' Swift-foot swings at the crossroads. Godden, my masters ! " And leading his weary beast, he took the road that skirted the forest.

The moon was at full, and he had yet a good stretch

of lonely way before him, when the horse stumbled and fell and would not rise.

"A murrain on the beast!" muttered Robin angrily, tugging in vain at the creature on whom death had taken pity. "I must e'en leave him by the wayside and tell Richard what hath befallen."

He stooped to loose the halter, and as he bent to his task a man slipped from the shadow of the hedge into the quiet moonlight. There was a thud, a dull cry, and Robin fell prone across the horse's neck—a pace beyond him in the moonlight shone the gleam of gold.

Next day Dickon's child died, ay, and the other five followed with scant time between the buryings. Another had fathered them and filled the gaping mouths; but men shuddered at his care, for it was the Black Death that they had deemed far from them.

Pale and woebegone they clustered on the green. News had come of Robin—he was dead when they found him—but no man gave heed. Death was in the air, death held them safe in walls they might not scale. The heavens were brass, food failed for man and beast, God and man alike had forsaken them. The forest lay one side, the river, now but a shallow, sluggish stream, lay the other; 'twas a cleft stick and the springe tightened.

No evil had as yet befallen Dickon. He stood with

the rest and murmured, cursing. All at once he made for the ale-house.

"Fools that we are to stand like helpless brats when there is liquor enough and to spare in yon cellars. He who is minded to go dry throat to Heaven had best make haste; for me I will e'en swill a bucket to the devil's health, and so to hell."

Half-a-dozen men followed him, pushing aside mine host who strove to bar the door. Some of the women fell on their knees and clamoured in half delirious prayer; the rest slunk dismayed to their pestilent homes.

CHAPTER VII

THE VISION OF THE EVENING AND THE MORNING

MEANWHILE, news came to the Monastery of the ill case of the village, for it lay scarce a league away across the forest; but the pine-trees stood as guardian angels in between.

The Prior summoned the whole Convent, according to the ruling of Blessed Benedict when the matter is a grave one, and told the tidings.

Then he went on to give reason for their assembling.

"My Brethren, it is in my heart that we dare not leave these poor, stricken sheep to die alone without shepherding; moreover, in their fear and desolation, they may flee to other villages, and so the terror and pest spread ever further. And I deem that, inasmuch as Charity is greater than Faith or Hope, so it is greater than obedience also. Wherefore I purpose to set aside the Rule of our Order in the letter that I may hold to it in the spirit, and go forth to serve these perishing brethren; and I will take with me whosoever hears the call of God in this visitation."

When he had made an end, there was silence in the Chapter. Break cloister, the Prior himself urging them thereto? The Convent might scarce credit its ears.

Prior Hilarius watched his children with a tender smile on his white face, and a prayer on his lips that love might have its triumph.

Five monks stood up, among them the Sub-Prior, and seven novices sprang also to their feet.

"Nay, Brother Walter," said Hilarius, turning to the Sub-Prior, "this flock must have its shepherd also; thy place is here. But I will take with me Brother Simon and Brother Leo, who will doubtless suffice at first for the ministry, and—" smiling at the novices—"all these dear lads to tend the sick and bury the dead."

The Sub-Prior ventured on a remonstrance.

"Good Father, it is not fitting that thou should'st go on such an errand; send me in thy stead, for my life is a small thing as compared with thine. Moreover these novices, 'tis but the other day the Master gave them as lazy and ill-conditioned, and——"

The Prior held up his hand.

"Dear Brother, I thank thee for thy love and care for me; but my call has come. As for these—" he stretched out his hand towards the waiting novices—"maybe they are in the wrong school, and the Lord

hath even opened the door that they may serve Him, perchance die for Him, elsewhere. And shall I count myself wiser than Prior Stephen, who set me without the gate to learn my lesson? Let us go in peace, my children, for we are about the Lord's business."

Very early next day, having eaten of Heavenly manna, the little band embraced their brethren and set out, laden with food and wine and herbs from the farmery; and the Prior appointed a place to which the Convent should send daily all things needed.

The shade of the forest was very welcome in the hot, breathless sunshine, and the scent of the pine-needles, odorous, pungent, rose at each footfall from the silent path. The Brethren chanted the Gradual Psalms as they paced two and two through the sun-lit aisles, full of the Prior's memories; and he looked up again to see Our Lady's robe across the tree-tops. Then all at once the Psalm broke, and Brother Simon, who was leading, stayed suddenly.

Under a bush beside the track lay a man, naked save for filthy rags; his hair and beard matted with moss and leaves; his eyes sunk, his lips drawn apart in a ghastly grin. Hilarius made haste to kneel beside him, and lo! sudden remembrance lighted the fast-glazing eyes, but his own answered not.

"My son, my son," said the Prior, and his voice was very pitiful, "thou art indeed in evil case; let me shrive thee ere it be too late."

He motioned the others to stand back, and raising the heavy head upon his shoulder, bent close to catch the whisper of the parched lips.

At first no sound came, and then a hoarse word reached him.

"The Convent's hens!"

The Prior stared amazed; then once more the laboured voice—

"Hast forgot thy theft, and the dancer?"

Hilarius needed no further word; in a moment the years were wiped away.

"Lad, lad, to find thee again, and in such sorry plight! But see, stay not thy shriving, for the time is short, and the Lord ever ready to pardon."

The man strove in vain to speak. At last he said quite clearly: "I hunger," and so saying died.

The Prior was greatly moved, and for a while he knelt in prayer, while the Brethren, amazed, waited his pleasure. Then he rose, and lo! before him lay the open glade where his schooling had begun, and he had seen a flower incarnate dance in the wind.

He bade them lift the dead, and lay him in the hollow of the glade under fallen branches, until they could

return and give him burial. Then, as they went on their way, he told the tale of his little maid ; and when the telling was ended, the village they had come to succour was in sight, and lo ! they saw it through a mist.

CHAPTER VIII

"BEHOLD THE FIELDS ARE WHITE"

THE Prior's heart was ready, and it seemed to him as he passed up the village and saw the huddled, helpless people, that his little maid led him by the hand.

Brother Simon, Brother Leo, and the novices turned aside to speak comfort and carry succour to the sick and fearful, and to bury the dead; for three unshriven souls had passed to judgment and mercy. Hilarius made straight for the ale-house.

As he crossed the green, the door opened and Dickon stumbled blindly down the steps. At sight of a monk he cried out, and, suddenly sobered, dropped on his knees, while the topers and roysterers staring from the open doorway fell into silence.

Hilarius pushed back his cowl and stood bareheaded in the scorching sun of that windless day; it came to his mind that he was very weary.

"Hear, O my children, the Lord hath sent me to succour you, lest ye go down quick into the pit. Return

every one of you, for the arms of His love are still stretched wide upon the Rood, and the very hairs of your head are numbered. Repent ye, therefore, and confess each one of you his sins, that I may prepare him for the work of the Lord; and take comfort also, for they that are with us are mighty."

One by one the men, sobered by the shock of great surprise, confessed and were shriven under the summer sun: only the man Dickon was not among them. Then the Prior bade them get to work as he should direct; and he set a watch that no man should flee the village; and all obeyed him.

Early and late the Prior toiled with the Brethren and his band of workers, nursing the sick, burying the dead, and destroying the pestilent dwellings.

Brother Leo was the first to whom the call came: he answered it like a soldier at his post.

As the Prior rose from the pallet of his dead son, one bade him come quickly, for a dying man had need of him. It was Dickon.

The Prior, bearing with him the Body of the Lord, made haste to the hovel where he lay, and shrived him though he scarce could hear his muttered words; but lo! when he would place the Host he could not, for a gold piece lay on the man's tongue. The Prior drew back dismayed, and behold, the Lord's hand struck

swiftly, and Dickon died with a barren shriving—on whom may Christ take pity!

Next day great grey clouds curtained the arid, staring sky; and at even came the rain. All through the night it fell; and one of the novices, who lay a-dying in the Prior's arms, heard it as he passed, and fell back, joy on his lips and a radiant smile on his young face.

"'*Esurientes implevit bonis*,'" said the Prior, as he laid him down, blessing God.

A second novice died, then a third, and yet another; but there was no need to call further help from the Monastery, for the Plague was stayed. Never had cloistered monks spent such a strange season; rarely such a blessed one.

The Feast of the Transfiguration was nigh at hand, and the Prior was minded to return on that day to the waiting, anxious Convent, for his work was done.

Great was the joy and preparation at the Monastery when the tidings reached them; joy too for those who lay not in the shelter of the cloister garth, but, as it were, on the battlefield where they had given their lives for their brethren.

The holy day dawned without a cloud. A strong west wind bowed the pines in the forest, and they worshipped and sang for joy, because of the face of the

Lord. The sun burnt bright in the great blue dome, and earth shone with pale reflection of his glory.

The monks paced the cloister walks, and waited and watched to catch the signal from the lay-brother posted without. At last the word came that voices were heard in the distance; and monks and novices hastened two and two to the gate. On the wind was borne the sound of a chant.

"'Tis a dirge for those that are gone," said Brother Anselm; and crossing themselves, the Brothers chanted out the sonorous response:

"Et lux perpetua luceat eis."

As they reached the open gate, the little band they waited for came slowly down the forest pathway.

Four Brothers, only four; and lo! on their shoulders they bore a rude bier of pine-branches.

This was the gathering of Brother Hilarius. Sweet-scented boughs for his last bed; Mary's lilies aglow for tapers tall; the censer of the forest swung by sun and wind; and the glory of the face of the Lord.

He had called his children to him in the late night-watches, and, having kissed and blessed them, he bade them turn him to the east, for his time had come; and they obeyed in sore grief and perplexed. Prior Hilarius lay and watched for the light, and as dawn parted night's

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veil with the long foregleam of the coming day, he shut his eyes like a tired child and went home.

It was his heart, Brother Simon thought; but the Sub-Prior cried through his tears:—

"Nay, nay, it was God a-hungered for His dear son."

They bore the Prior into the white-clad Church, and laid him on his forest-bed under the great Christ; and the novices, seeing the tender smile on the beautiful face, whispered one to another, "The Prior hath found his little maid." And the Convent made Hilarius a wondrous fair tomb of alabaster inlaid with gold, and carved him lying thereon with Mary's lilies across his breast.

THE END

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